ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

MURK

by Charles Francis Coe

Tentacles of the Underworld

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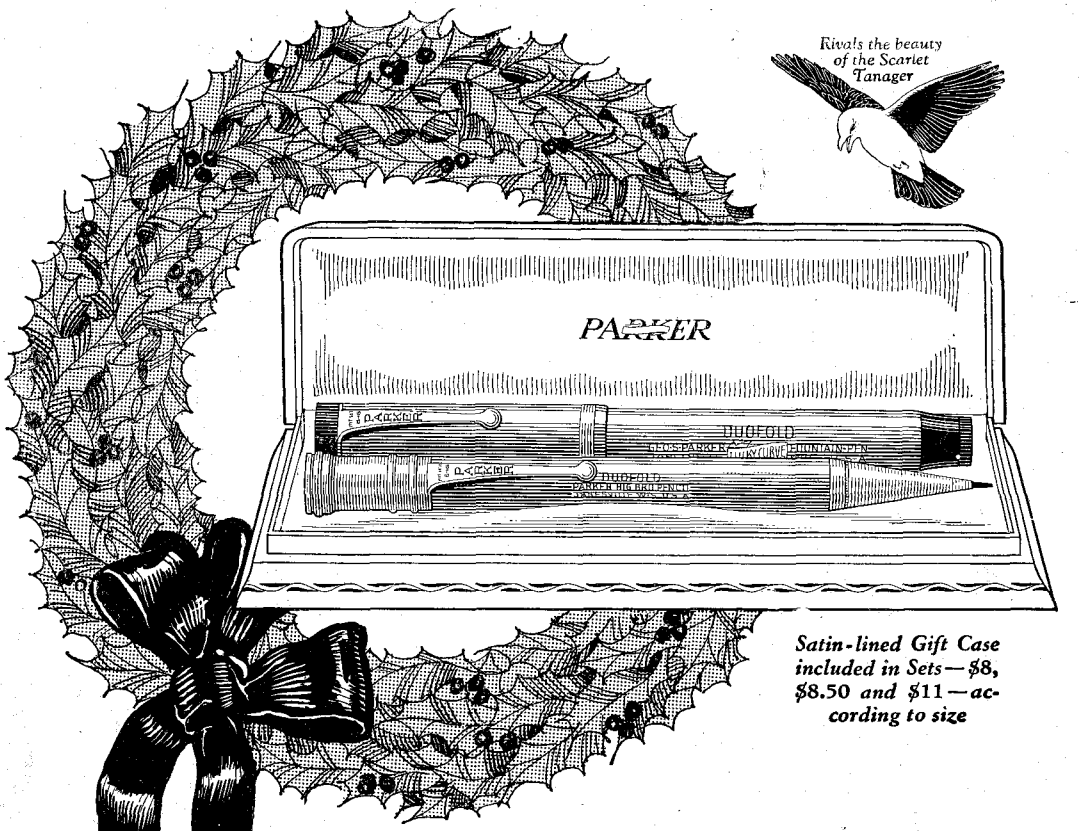

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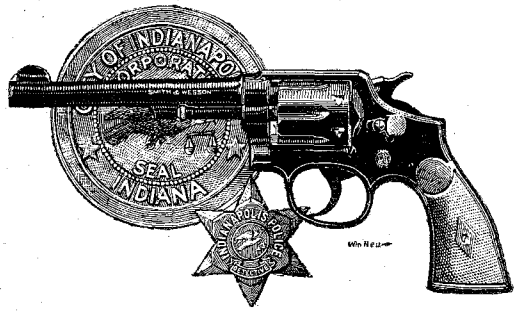

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIV CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 19, 1925 NUMBER 1

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Suppose you had married the one girl in all the world and another girl, unaware of the secret marriage, announced that *she* was your wife! And that for about two thousand reasons you could make no defense! That was the position of William Robbins in

There Goes the Bride. *By Edgar Franklin*

First of five amusing installments next week.

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOL. CLXXIV SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1925 NUMBER 1

Murk

By CHARLES FRANCIS COE

CHAPTER I.

REALITY.

MARY DELT turned into the narrow side street. Before her lay a scene grown familiar with the years. Wrapped as it was in the murky shadows of a portion of the city long since given over to those whose struggle with the social order has not been fraught with success, she nevertheless walked rapidly, surely.

It was night; eleven o'clock or after. The girl was returning from her work at the moving picture theater to the few rooms where her family made their home. Street lights flickered overhead, but their light was dim. Just enough light they gave to bring out the ugly brick walls of the tenements on either side, and to cast long shadows over the littered sidewalks.

As she walked she passed sagging stoops that led upward into shadowy hallways. On the steps sat men and women endeavoring to get a cooling breath of night air, for the day had been warm and Mary Delt well knew the continuous roar of traffic that filled the highway during the working hours.

The men sat about in overalls and sweaty shirts, and between words puffed at heavy-smelling pipes. Their hands were the hands of the laborer; their talk that of men who knew only the routine of work and such nights as these on the steps of

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dark hallways where they talked uncertainly of the manner in which their union was seeking a higher wage, or of what the ward boss might do at election time.

But Mary Delt knew, too, that these men soon would disappear into the hallways to wend their way to their rooms. And with their passing would appear others among the murky shadows; others whose hands were unstained by the ravages of toil and whose clothes were more like those of the men who lived in the world beyond and who could be seen riding about the city in their motor cars.

The girl had lived on the street all her life. She had learned that nocturnal wanderers lurked among the shadows of the tenements. Sometimes, late at night, when all else was still, she had heard the sudden outbreak of voices, the rattle of running feet over the uneven highway and sidewalks, the sharp rap of a policeman's night stick or the shrill of his whistle as he summoned aid.

Upon one such occasion she had heard her brother enter the house softly, hurriedly, and heard him in his room as he stripped off his clothing and dropped into bed. Then, outside, she had caught the voices of officers as they searched the alley. It was all very significant. Next morning Mary Delt had talked with her brother, warning him against conflict with the law.

"The hell with the law!" He had snapped back. "What does the law do for me? Lets me work twelve hours a day for half what I earn, that's what it does! Don't make me laugh—the law!"

Her father heard the latter part of the remark. Mary looked to him for aid. The man merely grunted and remarked:

"The law ain't for such as us, Mary. The rich get what they want and they pay for havin' the laws made to suit 'em. If they don't suit the way they're made, then they buy judges and lawyers and courts and get round 'em anyway. How can the law protect us? We ain't got anything to protect!"

Mary had looked at her father in horrified disgust as he spoke thus before a son already showing signs of waywardness. She turned then to her mother.

That poor soul, crushed beneath the weight of her daily toil and the years in the narrow street with all that it entailed, merely shook her head suggestively and took the line of least resistance. It was a trait of the people on that street, Mary thought, to take the line of least resistance.

So, now, she walked toward her home, scarcely noticing those about her. She was dominated by her brother and her father just as all the women on the street were dominated by their men folk.

Once in a great while she was apt to have dreams of moving away from the squalor of the street; moving out of the endless shadows and the constant murk that filled the highway much as a blue mist fills the mountain chasm. But those were only dreams. Dreams such as the ones about a Prince Charming who would appear and take her, in the arms of romance, out of it all and whisk her away to the luxuries of wealth and the beauties of affection.

She stepped around a drunken man who reeled perilously against the rail of his own steps and leered tauntingly into the face of his wife as the woman urged him to come into the house. The curses of the man blended with the other noises of the street as she passed him.

Mary Delt had reached that point where the noises had lost heterogeneity. They seemed to have blended themselves into a continuous roar and submerged any individuality they might have possessed. It was all just noise, and dirt, and commotion, and litter, and odors, and trouble. Trouble, that was it, Mary realized. Never was the street free of trouble.

Three blocks of the narrow street she had to travel before reaching her home. At the first intersection she paused to let a belated truck continue its way toward the close of the late day. Then again, she plunged into the endless rows of steps of the second block and walked through the same babble of voices and profusion of things distasteful to her.

At the second corner she paused again, once more for traffic. But this time the vehicle for which she waited was not a truck; that is, not a truck of commerce.

It was an enclosed affair with a step on

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the rear and heavy doors that closed tight and locked on the outside. It was the police patrol and on the rear step rode two uniformed minions of the law. Mary raised her eyes as she saw that it turned into the street and ran ahead of her.

The people on the steps stared inquiringly, then followed as they saw that the dread wagon was coming to a halt. Mary herself hastened her steps.

The police were ever a factor in the lives of the street. They represented a thing more or less hated because thoroughly misunderstood—the law.

Even as her brother detested the law; even as her father laughed at the law; even as those nocturnal prowlers about the street scoffed at and violated the law, Mary had come to regard it as a menace, a thing which was twisted to suit the needs or desires of those who administered it.

Now she saw that a crowd was gathered in the center of the block; just outside her own home, as it happened. She knew that some of the men who lived in her building were the type who slept late of day and who dressed well although they worked not.

It was these men she feared in connection with her brother. Doubtless one of them had fallen into the clutches of the strange law. She hurried onward.

At her doorstep an officer stopped her, and she saw that other officers had been inside the patrol wagon and now lined the murky hallway through which she must pass.

"I live here. I am returning home," she told the man who barred her way.

"All right, kid," he grinned casually. "You can go in as soon as we take out what we want, and not before!"

Mary dropped back into the fringe of the growing crowd. There came from above the tramping of feet and the girl watched as two policemen appeared leading two men who argued against that which was inevitable. One of the men was her father. The other was her brother.

With a low cry of horror and fear she darted forward, only to be thrust back by the officer who first had stopped her.

"What have they done? Why are they taking them?" she demanded almost harshly. "They are my father and my brother—I've a right to know!"

The girl started forward again only to be stopped ruthlessly by the officer.

"Don't try that stuff!" he warned, seizing her arms.

"I've got a right to see my own father and brother!" she cried, at the same time struggling to free herself.

"Better get used to doin' without 'em, kid," the policeman grinned callously. "It ain't none of my business and all I'm doin' is my job."

By this time the two were at the rear step of the wagon. Her father saw her now and turning, called over his shoulder:

"Get help, Mary. See if Laughlin can't do somethin' before they frame us up."

One of the officers laughed harshly at the words and pushed the older man up the steps and into the wagon. Mary, free from the grasp of the officer, darted forward and seized her brother by the arms.

She was pushed aside so roughly by another police officer that her hat became awry and she grew slightly hysterical. She clenched her fist and cried out. On the point of losing her head entirely she felt an easier grip upon her arm and the voice of a welcome friend in her ear. She turned to face Sergeant Crinton of the hated police.

"Easy, Mary, child," the man said. "Sure, this is interfering with the law and they'll be after putting you into the wagon along with the others. Let them go now, child; let them go. We'll see what's to be done before long."

He led her to the walk. Then to the assembled curious he waved an authoritative hand and ordered them to disperse.

There was something about Crinton that kept him much in the street. He had been transferred when elevated to a sergeantcy, but his absence was of short duration.

Born himself in the locality and having served as patrolman on the beat for many years, he knew the street and its people. Authorities in the department soon brought him back, that his personality and presence might restore such order as could be hoped for.

"Why are they taking them?" There

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were tears in the eyes of the girl now and her voice wavered on the edge of complete hysteria. "What can I do, Mr. Crinton? What have they done?"

Crinton still held her arm and adroitly led her up the steps leading into her own murky hallway.

"You run along up to your old mother now, Mary. She'll be after needing you sure enough. I'll be back later on. Now don't give in to yourself—think of your mother."

Mary darted up the stairs and the sergeant walked down the street in the direction which the patrol wagon had gone. His forehead was wrinkled deeply and now and then he shook his head as if worried.

The girl found her mother seated in the dull room they had always called "parlor." The tired, old woman seemed in a daze. It was as though she had not yet fully grasped that which had happened. She raised her eyes to her daughter and smiled absently, almost foolishly.

With a low cry Mary Delt dropped to her knees at her mother's side and looked earnestly upward into the faded face.

"What is it, mother? What has happened?"

"They took 'em away—both of 'em, Mary. They just walked right in and took 'em. Your father and Joe—both of 'em. They took 'em away."

"I know, but why? What did father and Joe do? They don't take people away for nothing, mother!"

"Something about furs," was the absent reply; "they said something about furs that were stolen. When they said that, your father turned on Joe, he did. He said: 'You been talkin', damn you!'—just like that he said it. And Joe tried to lie and say he hadn't. I could always tell when Joe was lyin', Mary. Then the police laughed and told pa not to say too much. Then they took 'em away."

It was nearing twelve when Crinton returned to the hallway and rather ponderously climbed the three flights of stairs to the door of the Delt apartment. He knocked softly and opened the door when Mary called to him. The girl was sitting alone at a plain wooden table, before her, untouched, her usual midnight bowl of crackers and milk. She looked up at him.

"I can tell by your face there's no hope, Mr. Crinton," she said slowly. The hysterical note had disappeared from her voice. The sergeant crossed the room to her side and rather awkwardly laid his big hand over hers.

"I'm afraid you're right, Mary. I guess they been up to tricks. Your father is getting along in years and he's finding the dock work pretty heavy, Mary. I guess he wanted a little ease and comfort and couldn't see any other way of getting it. It's too bad."

"What did they do?"

"Four of them robbed a fur store. They got all four of them, and Joe, he did too much talkin', I guess. The other two has confessed the job."

"How long will they be—gone?"

"I'll do whatever I can, Mary."

"A long time?"

"Maybe, Mary. I hate to say it, but you know what the courts are doin' about crime now. All the papers complaining, and all that. A conviction looks pretty good to the police and the district attorney both right now."

Mary rested her forehead in her palm and the officer thought he saw a slight shudder run through her small body. The pressure of his hand increased and she raised her eyes and smiled wistfully.

"You're a good friend, Mr. Crinton. A good friend."

"Sure and why not? I've known you, Mary, since the days you was in short skirts and I used to help you across the street when you came from school! You're a fine girl, Mary, and a pretty one. Too pretty, I used to think, but you've shown heaps of sense these last few years."

Silence ensued for several moments, then Crinton spoke again:

"We might as well take things as they are, child. Telling ourselves that everything's going to be all right when we know it ain't won't help us a bit. What are you going to do if they are—sent up?"

"Stay here. Take care of mother."

"I stopped on the way up here, Mary. I talked with Laughlin. I asked him first

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how you satisfied him as ticket seller at the theater and he said you were a fine girl.

"Then I told him he was doing such a fine business he ought to pay you more now that trouble had come upon you and I pointed out easy and careful that he has been lettin' folks stand in the aisles at some of his shows and that's against the law. He said he'd raise you three dollars a week beginning now."

A tear traced its way down the girl's cheek and dropped softly onto the board table. Crinton, seeing it, patted her hand gently and shifted his huge feet uncertainly. He swallowed once or twice, glanced hastily about the room, patted her hand again:

"I bet Smitz don't know how bad these fire escapes are on this here building, Mary," he blundered along. "I bet he don't. I bet if he did he'd lower your rent quick, don't you? I'll have a talk with Smitz in the morning, that I will!"

He saw that the girl was crying now and in the force of his emotions he did a thing which was a source of surprise to him all the rest of his life. He seized her hand and drew her over onto his own huge lap.

She came quite willingly, her touseled blond head nestling against his great shoulder and her tears dripping across his badge, down onto the blue of his coat.

"The damned spalpeens!" the officer growled, apparently caring not upon whom his maledictions fell. "The damned spalpeens! Sure and we'll fix this thing somehow, child!"

His arms were around her, his hand patting her shoulder rather helplessly. Her hair rubbed against his cheek and he drew her head closer and kissed it, the while muttering things unintelligible and the more valuable because they could not be understood. They were as the endless murmur of a brook, reverberations of a haven eternal.

"Sure you're a fine little girl, Mary and old man Crinton is your friend, you may lay to that! I'll have the old lady around here in the morning, too. She'll know best what to say to your mother, child. Now keep a stiff upper lip and no matter what comes along we'll find a way to keep up and going!"

He remained with her until she stopped crying, and her eyes were heavy with sleep.

"I am glad mother could sleep," she said, as she went with him to the door. "I'll never forget how kind you have been."

"There, there, now! Kind! Sure, ain't we friends, Mary? Ain't I been like a daddy to you ever since you learned to walk?"

She reached up and caught his cheeks in her palms. Much to his embarrassment and delight both, she drew his face down and kissed him.

"You have given me courage and help both, Daddy Crinton."

"I'll see Smitz about these fire escapes the first thing in the morning," he muttered confusedly, "and I'll tell the wife to run along over here and see what she can do for your mother."

He went down the stairs, dimly lit by open gas jets as they were, and out into the street. Many years he had known the street and trod its uneven way, but never before had he realized so poignantly the sordidness of it. Here and there young men lounged in the shadows of doorways.

"Go along home with you now, Dinny Rafferty!" He called to one young fellow. "Didn't you see them take little Joe Delt to-day? Be off with you! First thing you know they'll be passin' your meals through a grating, too!"

Crinton knew everybody on the street. Unconsciously he had become a father to the street and to those upon it. But to-night he felt the grip of stark reality. The defenselessness of Mary Delt seemed to form a mental screen upon which in panoramic array appeared the events of the years. Trouble! The street, ever a crucible of new-born ambitions and defeated hopes, bred jealousies, violences, crime.

He stared at the bleak tenements, sensed the endless odors that seeped through their dirty windows and realized the infinite and hopeless groping of those inside for the better things of life. The street oppressed him. Its murkiness stifled him.

He longed for a mighty brush laden with whitewash that he might blot out the stains

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of time, the wavering shadows, the littered walks, the cluttered curbs, the ramshackle and soiled steps, the cavernous hallways. The place was an invitation to crime. It bred crime in those who must live in it.

The great truth of environment assailed him suddenly. He longed to find sunshine and fresh air and clean, wholesome food with which to replace the deeds and the hatreds and the crimes that grew in this endless murk.

CHAPTER II.

ADJUSTMENT.

DURING the next three months Mary Delt learned many things. Crinton, ever a second father to the girl, advised her. Her employer, anxious to remain in the good graces of the officer, raised her salary so that the immediate needs of herself and mother were met. To augment this additional income, Smitz, their landlord, smilingly reduced their rent nearly fifty per cent. On the score of food and shelter they seemed cared for.

But over their heads hung the impending trial of their relatives. Crinton, well versed in such matters, assured them that, even though they had funds, it would be wasting them to employ expensive attorneys in the hope that the men might avoid penalty for a crime they had really committed.

"You got yourself and your mother to look out for, Mary," he counseled. "The men folks knew what they were facing when they went into this thing, and now that they are caught it's far more their responsibility than yours. If you were rich, all right. You ain't.

"I talked with your old man and your brother the other day and they both sent word to you to watch out for your mother and yourself, and they'll take theirs the way it comes. There ain't a thing can be done for 'em, as I see it, girl!"

And so it proved.

For such things as death and trials there is no real preparation. There is always a vagrant, unfounded hope in the heart of those who wait, and the death of that hope is a shock.

Mary Delt felt it when the judge actually pronounced sentence. Her mother, faced now with the sight of her loved ones being led away from her, collapsed. The sentence was harsh.

"Twelve to fifteen years in the state's prison!"

To those who knew, it spelled finis to the life of Delt, the father. The man had worked too hard and too long to enter a penal institution and live through such a time. To the younger man it meant worse than death. He, probably, would serve his time and return to freedom with the formative years of his life seeped in hatred and surreptitious plans.

Mary felt, as she left the court after kissing them both a last good-by, that she faced life alone; that henceforth her mother and herself must live by her effort.

Crinton and his wife did all that they could to assuage that final blow. The wife was there waiting when the girl and her mother returned from court. She saw, as did Mary, that the mother had succumbed to the finality of fate.

"They took 'em away," she mumbled uncertainly to Mrs. Crinton. "They took 'em away. Both of 'em! They come right in and took 'em away. Joe and pa, too. Joe tried to lie, but I could always tell when he was lying!"

And so the old lady talked as long as she lived.

There was nothing that Mary might do to avoid leaving her mother alone. She must work. So, for many months she returned each night to her home in the dread that she would find her last of kin the victim of her own insanity. That, however, passed away.

Mrs. Delt remained as she had been the first day. Her mind, rather than being roused to insanity, was dulled to coma. It was an obsession that pictured only that dreadful night when they had come upon her and taken away her husband and her son. Mary came to be thankful for that simple-mindedness in time. It dulled the edge of the suffering that must otherwise have been the mother's.

Every other Sunday, Mary had free. It was her first "off day" after the sentence

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that Crinton insisted that she and her mother come to his home for Sunday dinner.

"I have a fine young son there, Mary," he warned jokingly. "Sure he'll be after you if he has the sense of his father! But it's the dinner I'll call to your attention. The old lady does fine things with food! She was born a cook and was a cook when I married her and, sure, she's still a cook and growing cookier every day! Come along and prove me a liar!"

They went, the mother in the one black dress that had served as her "best" for years; Mary in the simple frock that her own wages had purchased. Although events failed to rouse the hopeless coma of Mrs. Delt, the dinner was a success. It was Mary's first glimpse of real home life and roused within her the dreams of a Prince Charming.

"This is the son, Mary," Crinton announced as he led a young man into the room. "He's going now to the business college and I've fine hopes of him! Danny, this is Mary Delt, as sweet and fine a girl as ever lived! Nora," he called out to his wife, "see here what I do to the daughter you never gave me!"

He caught Mary in his arms and kissed her resoundingly. Mrs. Crinton affected an outraged jealousy and Mary, almost overcome by the warmth of their affection, verged upon tears.

"That's the policeman of it, Mary," Mrs. Crinton warned in mock seriousness. "Never was there one of them honest. Blarney it is from the minute they take the dago's bananas till they come home to their wives and spread more blarney!"

"Now, macushla," Crinton grinned, "sure a fine husband I've been, and by the whiff of the dinner a good wife you are! When do we eat?"

Mrs. Crinton waved a ladle in despair and hied herself toward the kitchen whence came the odors of food. Danny Crinton laughed uncertainly and came toward Mary Delt.

Crinton, his eyes glowing at sight of the move, gave his attention to Mrs. Delt. He led her into the small yard back of their home and showed her the flower bed that was the pride of his eye.

"Ain't they a fine couple for you, Mrs. Delt?" he demanded. "Sure, there never was finer! Mary is a beautiful and a fine girl. Danny is a good boy! Of course he's young, yet, is Danny. And sometimes I think he's lacking the things that make a policeman, but—they're a fine couple they are that!"

"They come and took 'em away. Took 'em both away." Mrs. Delt chanted hollowly, and the look of joy which had transfused Crinton's features passed away, leaving in its wake a furrowed brow; a solid concern that he kept as much as possible from Mary Delt.

"Trouble comes upon us all, Mrs. Delt," he said slowly; "you have yours, I have mine. I was just thinking that should Mary happen to take to Danny and Danny take to Mary, sure a lot of trouble might be overcome, and that's no joke."

But the significance of the remark was lost upon the woman. Once or twice she picked one of the flowers and held it to her face. A smile of pleasure would lighten her features then, but it passed soon and when she spoke it was always in the same manner. The love of life was gone in the woman; the crash of her mentality seemed complete.

At table Crinton was like an overgrown boy. He spoke glowingly of the joys of the wedded state and pointed out the excellent evidence of the dinner they ate to substantiate his claim that it was the one way to live.

"Sure Nora and I were married when she was but twenty and I twenty-four. Trouble we've had, yes. But during the hottest moment of it we loved each other like children, eh, Nora? And never has been the time when we wouldn't pass through the fires of hell each for the other, I'm saying!"

"Sure, Mary, you've roused the old man to romancing!" Mrs. Crinton laughed. "It's a funny thing to me how a fat, old cop can be led astray by a pretty girl half his age, that it is!"

"If you could only realize how much Daddy Crinton has done for us!" Mary said. "He got my salary raised, our rent lowered—he is the best friend I ever had!"

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"The Crintons ain't a bad lot, Mary," the officer said pointedly. "Of course we ain't rich and powerful, but we manage damned well in our own way and we get a lot of joy out of life! I wouldn't trade my Nora and my Danny for all the riches in the country, that I wouldn't!"

Danny blushed a little and glanced at Mary. Her cheeks showed that she had caught the inference and the officer roared his delight at what he thought was germination of the love microbe.

"What you must do now, Mary, is get away from the street," he said suddenly, his tone grown quickly serious. "It ain't the place for you. Coming out of your house the other night, the night that—the other night—I saw the thing like I never saw it before. Mary, it ain't the place for the likes of you! Who can live there and not feel it pressing them down? I couldn't!

"It's the air of the street, Mary. The people are suffocating down there and they don't know it. It never get's sunny in that damned place! At night the shadows are as long as the night itself and during the day there's nothing but dirt and noise! I tell you it's murk that does it; murk that a body can't see through and that seems like a promise to hide anything you do!"

Mary laughed uncertainly.

"I have no love for it, Daddy Crinton. And I'd love to get mother out of it. But where can we go? What can we do? With the rent Smitz is giving us now we have got to stay there. Suppose that—well—suppose that one of us got sick?" Mary glanced unconsciously at her mother. "What would we do then? You see, I must save money against such a thing. Father and Joe left us nothing; it's my problem."

"Faith, now," cut in Mrs. Crinton, who had sensed the drift of things and realized that her husband was endeavoring to bring these young people together, "is the dinner not good enough to be talked about a minute? Must we be courting trouble for us all? Danny, hand Mary and her mother more of them potatoes and see that the gravy gets about. Here, old man, stop your fool romancing and cut off some of that roast for the folks!"

"Sure any romancing I do will be with you, macushla," Crinton grinned, at the same time making endearing motions with the carving knife as he poised it over the roast. "The dinner is all that a dinner could be, that I'll say, and if I didn't say it before it's because you've kept me fed up on the best food so long that angel cake looks like rye bread!"

"I'm surprised you ain't the mayor himself!" Mrs. Crinton avowed. "Did you ever hear the likes of such talk, Mary? Never marry a copper! All day they say such things whether it means their wife or whatever!" But the gleam in her eyes belied the words and Mary felt again that tremendous urge for a home, and such affection as she saw about her at the Crintons.

It was a glorious day for the girl, a day that gave her the first tangible realization of a world different than that of the street; her first glimpse of a world of affection and love and the better things of life free from the constant menace of that thing which Crinton had called the murk. When she left the Crinton home late in the afternoon, Danny Crinton asked her if she would go with him to one of the beaches two weeks hence.

"I'd love to," she assured the young man, "but you see, my mother cannot well be left alone the only day I really have to be with her."

"Your mother will come here and spend the day," Crinton cut in almost savagely. "You young folks run off and make a day of it. We'll keep her here all safe and sound until you come back and we'll have a little supper waiting for you!"

Because Mary could think of no reason why she should not acquiesce, it was so arranged.

"A fine girl, that!" Crinton mused as he returned to his smoke and Sunday paper. "A fine girl!"

"A peach!" agreed Danny Crinton. "Pretty, too, huh?"

From that day onward the interest of the officer in the welfare of the girl was enhanced by a growing belief that she would, some day, become his daughter in reality. By many little signs Danny Crinton showed

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his shrewd father that his interest in Mary bade fair not to be a passing one. Unknown either to his wife or son Crinton did considerable planning and not a little dreaming.

He watched the two closely the evening they returned from the beach and remained at the house for supper. Danny was happier than his father had ever seen him. Mary, face flushed from the day in the open and the pleasure of the trip, seemed radiant.

The older man was sure in his own mind that he had struck a match that would suit him perfectly. He saw that his son was completely captivated by the simple charm of the girl and the grit and determination with which she faced the problems that had so suddenly confronted her.

He pressed again upon her the need of their moving away from the street and to her statements that they could not afford it he offered a non-committal, "maybe something could be done about it."

The weeks lengthened into months and with an imperceptible decline the mother of Mary Delt crept toward her earthly reward. Probably Crinton himself was the only one who realized that the woman's body was shattered as well as her tired mind. The officer, planning always on the future he dreamed for his son and the girl, prepared Mary for that which he thought inevitable.

Winter came and the murk of the street seemed rather enhanced than lessened by the mantle of white which filled the place. Immediately after a storm the street would be lighter and the reflection of the lights would appear to dance happily upon the glistening snow.

Then the murk would settle. Out of it millions of particles of dust and dirt would gather and attack the one thing beautiful. Soon the white was a sordid brown; the sidewalks mere slushways. The murk always triumphed.

It was on such a day that Mrs. Delt fell ill in the accepted sense. During the night before she had taken up a dry, hacking cough. Mary heard her moving about and went to her.

"They come and took 'em away," she muttered. "Took 'em both away."

Fever set in and Mary sent for the doctor. He gave the old lady medicine and very frankly offered Mary a dubious shake of the head when she queried him. Long after he had left, Mary stood at the dingy window and gazed into the littered court below her. It was snowing; the flakes sifting down through the shadows like phantoms from another world.

All about her seemed white and clean and beautiful. The rubbish pile in the far corner of the yard was altered into a gleaming mountain of cleanliness. It was as though Nature had tired of the sordidness of the place and, in her own manner, was hiding it from view.

But Mary knew that it would change. She had seen it all before. Even now the forces of the murk were gathering and would sally forth on the very heels of the snow. Then the mantle of white would falter, shrink away, and once again would be the blight.

It was all very real to the girl, this hopeless struggle of beauty in that environment. She saw how hopeless it was. The snow could not survive. It must die. The thought became suddenly poignant; possessed of a clearer and more startling meaning.

The girl turned away from the window, her face tense, drawn with the suddenness of realization. She went to her mother's side and placed a hand gently upon the wrinkled forehead.

"They come and took 'em away. Took 'em both away," the old lady muttered. Under Mary's hand the sallow flesh of her kin burned hot and dry. For a long time the girl sat silent, staring into the uncertain light of the room; gazing, fascinated, upon the face of her mother. Something of the futility of life impressed her. She caught for the first time a definite impression of defeat, impotence to cope with the things by which she was surrounded.

"Murk," she muttered once, "that is what Daddy Crinton means. The everlasting shadows that hide all fine things; the terrible something which hangs like a cloud over the street and every one on it. No wonder father and Joe were foolish; it was just that they saw more clearly than I did.

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I'm beginning to see now—and beginning to hate, too!"

Just after dawn she called Mrs. Crinton, from the booth of the all-night drug store at the corner. That good woman came at once. They were there when Mary Delt's mother found her last great peace.

Even greater than the sorrow that oppressed Mary, a sudden fear grew. It was fear of the murk; of the place in which she had lived so long. She seemed to see in it the cause of her father's downfall; of Joe's, and even of the death of her mother.

The empty hallways were gaping faces that sneered at her as she passed them; sneered and mouthed a promise that they would reach her if she but remained near enough.

The burial of her mother had taken all her savings. She had only her small salary at the theater upon which to live, but felt certain that, so long as she was able to work, she had naught to fear on that score.

Crinton, out of the bigness of his heart, impressed upon her that she should never want for things. She must let him help. Danny was ever at hand to serve her with the blind adoration that he felt for her.

But the girl solved her own problems and determined her own course. A month after her mother had passed away she appeared one evening at the Crinton home. Sergeant Crinton smiled as he heard her decision, couched in terms that were tempered to high determination:

"I'm going away from the street. I cannot stand it there any longer. With mother gone, I can afford a little more rent; and I want a place where I can live in quiet and build a little nest I can call my own. I want the sun to reach the rooms, I want the halls clean and bright, I want something besides the gas jets for light—I want to get away from this hell on earth, Daddy Crinton, away from the everlasting murk!"

"Faith, dear child 'tis the best word I've had this year!" Crinton cried. "The very best, by jumpin' Jupiter! Do it you shall, and it's me that'll help it along. Why not go over to that new place, the Glendon? I know the manager of that and he'll do a little better by you for the fact.

"They have small places with a nice room and a bathroom that has tile floors and white tubs. Oh, it's right up to the minute, this Glendon is, honey, child! Then they have a kitchenette where cooking can be done.

"Them on the first floor is forty a month, so is the second, but up above that we could get cheaper. I bet twenty-five dollars a month, me knowing the boss!

"It even has an elevator, Mary!" he concluded, triumphantly.

"How do you know all this, Daddy Crinton?—rents and the kind of apartments?"

"I was looking them over, Mary," Crinton admitted, slightly abashed. "Looking them over, I was; know why? Just because I wasn't planning on having you stay round the street any longer!"

He came to her and slipped his big arm about her waist. "The old lady and me was talking it all over, girl. We decided it was the thing to do because there you'd have everything nice, and get a lot of interest that would be new to you. It's a heap of trouble you've been having lately, but I'm thinking everything is working for the best end.

"You get over there and we'll talk with my friend at the Glendon.

"You know, girl, it won't be long before you'll be starting out on a new life altogether. A fine life that'll give some nice young fellow the right to keep you happy and get these things off your poor mind."

"Why, Daddy Crinton! It can't be you are talking about marrying?"

"Faith and why not? You're pretty as the snows of Athlone, Mary, dear. Somebody soon will corner you and look into them pretty eyes of yours and say things that 'll sound like nothing you ever heard."

"But that is not for such as me, Daddy Crinton. Who would marry me? Father and Joe in prison—why—I'm a jailbird's daughter and a jailbird's sister!"

"Anybody'd marry you!" Danny Crinton announced excitedly. "Anybody would, and darned lucky to get the chance! Mary—"

"Heigh ho! What's this now?" the older Crinton demanded prematurely, his face beaming. Danny snatched his cap from the table in the hall and fairly darted from the house.

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Mary walked slowly home that evening. A great awe seemed to have taken possession of her. She had heard the words of Danny Crinton. She had seen the expression on his face as he spoke, and caught the passionate fire of his eyes.

She realized that Danny Crinton would marry her; that he loved her! It was a tremendous thing.

Unconsciously she erected new valuations. Something within her altered to this new discovery. She seemed to herself no longer just Mary Delt. There was new significance about her. She was a girl—a woman—that a man wanted! And the man was young, and strong, and fine.

But her only emotion was one of awe. There was no thrill within her such as must have set alight the look in Danny Crinton's eyes.

CHAPTER III.

PRINCE CHARMING.

THERE was a year of solid happiness at the Glendon. Mary obtained a small apartment on the fourth floor. The windows looked out upon a street reservation where trees grew, along with shrubs that showed a glorious green in the warm summer sun. Her hours at the theater had been shortened because Loughlin, owner of the place, had waxed prosperous and built an addition. There were three girls working in the reliefs at the ticket office now.

Best of all the times, doubtless, were those frequent occasions when the Crintons came to meals. There was the time, for instance, when the father, intent upon aiding with the preparation of the meal, had become entangled in the tiny kitchenette and required the aid and guidance of the entire party to free himself.

One thing more there was; a thing which wiser heads would have seen as a master move on the part of the police officer in the rôle of matchmaker. He had purchased a small car and there were rides out into the country with picnic lunches. Again, Danny came frequently and they rode alone, Mary and Danny.

The lad, ever attentive and blindly devoted, was ineffably bashful. Once he caught Mary's hand and held it for a moment. He seemed on the point of speaking that which was in his heart, but the girl prevented him:

"Isn't it all wonderful, Danny!" she cried. "I am so happy, and you have all been so good to me. These rides are like little excursions into Paradise!"

"Yes. Uh, huh. Yeah—" Then he laughed uneasily and let his opportunity slip away as Mary Delt called attention to other things.

It was through Danny Crinton that Mary Delt met Tommy Rand. Danny had left his business school and entered the offices of a large storage warehouse company. Tommy worked with him in the office.

The two became inseparable friends and in the natural course of events Mary and Tommy were brought together. If there be such a thing as love at first sight, theirs was that thing.

The two boys were opposites in temperament. Danny was slow and thoughtful; his every thought a serious one. Tommy was brilliant, quick, active, dangerously superficial but innately attractive.

It was Tommy who always said the bright thing; Tommy who provoked the laugh; Tommy who kept matters moving at high speed and interest. It was Tommy toward whom Mary Delt found the blind devotion, the inexplicable but consuming thing which gripped her heart.

Like the death of Mary's mother this new element grew imperceptibly but with the speed of a full tide. It had consumed the girl before she had become aware of it.

It had gripped Tommy while he was yet unaware of the depths to which it had gone. And, without the boys realizing it, it built between them a barrier that neither conceded but both felt. That barrier was never reduced to words, never admitted by either even to himself.

Daddy Crinton, blindly confident that Danny was soon to come to him with the great word that Mary and himself loved each other, brushed aside all evidences, stumbled blindly over them, until the crushing hour of truth came about.

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Tommy bought a small car. He was immensely proud of it and brought it at once for Mary to have the first ride. They went out into the country as Mary had so often done with Danny.

But when Tommy caught her hand in his own there was nothing that she could say or do to prevent the words she knew instinctively he was to say. Instead, she waited breathless to hear them. It seemed that some irresistible power had suddenly risen to consume her.

Out of the ages, it seemed to come; to rise, powerful as the very world about her, and proclaim within her soul that here was Destiny.

"Mary," she heard him say, his voice husky with an emotion that was unusual. "Mary—you know what I'm going to say to you. You couldn't help but know. I love you to death, girly. Please—"

That was all that was said between them for many minutes. Mary turned her eyes toward his. She felt his grip upon her hand tighten. Then he drew her toward him and she did not resist.

Next her head was upon his shoulder and her lips and cheek stung deliciously from the contact of his lips. For one thrilling lapse she permitted all things but Tommy to recede from her mind.

She gave herself over entirely to the delicious realization, the unnamable bliss that seemed to transport her through the portals of the ultimate. Then she wept.

"Tommy, I do love you. I love you more than you know. It must be true that women love more dearly than men. But we must say no more about it, Tommy. There must never be such a scene again.

"Don't misunderstand, dear. I will never forget the joy of to-day—never. I will love you always. But there it must end, Tommy. There is something you do not know."

But the light-heartedness of the youth had returned now. He was possessed of that which meant all things to him. In his heart he knew that there could be nothing that would keep them apart so long as Mary loved him. So he laughed; laughed softly, tenderly, his tones tempered with a delight that rang like a soul chime.

"Silly kid!" he murmured. "Silly, lovely, wonderful little kid! Think I'll ever let you go? Kiss me!"

"But Tommy—Oh, Tommy—you don't understand—you don't know!—"

"Could it be that you were going to tell me about your father and your brother, honey? I'm just wondering if that wasn't what's bothering your pretty head?"

"You know—about them?"

"You bet! See, I love you enough to tell you all about it and lose the chance of being a hero by taking you in my arms and saying, 'Still, I love you, my heroine! I careth not for whateth there may be-eth in thy past, love hath consumeth me."

But Mary could not laugh at the sally. She felt his arms about her tighten again, felt herself pulled close to his sheltering embrace, and the tears came again. He kissed them away.

All that the girl seemed capable of realizing was that she had found her harbor of refuge; that here was Prince Charming! Even the blight of the murk must fade away before the sun blasts of such a love as this. Once more she let herself drift away into the sea of blissful forgetfulness.

It was nearing dinner time when they returned to the city.

"Won't Daddy Crinton be surprised, Tommy?" Mary laughed. "He always said that I'd soon be married and I always told him there would be nobody willing to marry me."

"I'd marry you if you'd swiped the furs yourself, honey!"

"You dear! But what will they say? Just think of it all, Tommy. We'll take that larger place at the Glendon and with what furniture I've got and the few things we'll buy out of our savings, we'll have a wonderful little home of our own!

"Daddy Crinton will give us something nice, too. I know him well enough for that."

"We won't tell them till next Sunday, honey. We'll make it a big surprise for them," Tommy laughed. "Let's fix up a big dinner and get the three of them over to your house and then, after the dinner, we'll tell them! Gee, what a kick there is in that, huh?"

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So it was arranged. And by the time Sunday came and with it the happy Crintons, many plans have been laid.

Tommy had thirty dollars a week salary. By paying thirty-five dollars a month for rent and twenty-two dollars a month installment on the new automobile, they found a narrow margin indeed for the other expenses of wedlock. But they were happy, young, absorbed in the profound optimism of that condition.

"I've got enough saved anyway to pay off the flivver if I have to," Tommy announced. "We'll find a way, all right. I hate to give up the car, honey. You love it so."

So they planned. Tommy wanted to marry at once, and to save her life Mary could think of no good reason for delay.

In the spectrum of life there seems to be an elastic quality which shuts out with contraction many quite obvious things that lovers should but cannot see. These two suffered that contraction of vision.

The Crintons came. Mrs. Crinton, although she had done the same thing every visit since Mary had been alone, managed to forget her contribution to the dinner until the propitious moment. Then she dashed into the area called a hall and offered it, in the nature of "a little surprise."

Crinton roamed about the two rooms like a bear in a cage; a man who is delightfully confined among the things he loves.

"Sure, you feed a man too much and too well, child," he boomed. "Especially for a place like this. Once I got caught in the kitchen. Stuff me enough to-day with good food and I bet I'll get caught going out through the door!"

"That's how I know he's a good policeman, Mary," Mrs. Crinton announced. "He's growing so fat, by the Saints!"

"He can sleep standing up, too!" Tommy announced maliciously. "That's a sure sign."

The Crintons, themselves absorbed in the pleasure of the hour, failed to note the air of tensity that gripped the two plotters. Danny came to the defense of his good-natured parent.

"Just the same dad will soon be off the streets! I heard only the other day that he's next in line for lieutenant! That ain't so bad, is it? It takes a darn good man to be a police lieutenant in this town!"

Crinton acknowledged that he had hopes of an appointment soon. Mary and Tommy both gave vent to their pleasure at the news. All five might have been Crintons, so keen was the affection that enwrapped them all.

The meal was the sort which Mary had learned to love; the men announcing their belief in the perfection of the food; Mrs. Crinton presiding over festivities like the matronly soul she ever would be. Banter of a sort that disclosed the affection by which it was prompted filled the air. Compliments for the hostess that fairly made her ears ring with pride and this new joy which soon they would all share.

"I know what I'm going to do, Mary," Tommy announced as they neared the end of the meal. "I'm going to run down to the corner and get a quart of ice cream! Please let me—it'll go great and it's my treat." He was gone while yet they assured him that already they had eaten more than their share—but they ate the cream when he returned.

Then he brought out a twenty-five cent cigar for Crinton and presented it in such manner that the band might be read and quality thus appreciated. Scarcely had the clouds of smoke from the weed wrapped themselves about the placid features of Crinton when Tommy sprung his great surprise.

"Folks!" he cried gayly. "I'm going to ask that you all watch me very closely. See that I have nothing up my sleeve and that my magic is real!" They regarded him smilingly.

"Now watch—this is going to be a miracle and one that you don't want to miss and never will forget! Watch closely!"

He walked grotesquely across the room toward Mary, his hands describing weird circles before him. "This is the way I cast my spell over 'em, see?"

As he reached the girl's side she sensed what he was about. A blush of happiness overspread her face.

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She turned toward him and he slipped his arms about her and planted a kiss upon her lips.

"A miracle!" He proclaimed grandiloquently. But the words fell upon a hollow, death-like silence. Danny Crinton, seated in a corner of the room, gulped audibly.

The father's jaws clamped down so hard upon his cigar that a stream of ashes coursed down over his vest.

"Mary and I love each other," Tommy continued, slightly abashed now by the anti-climax he had wrought. "We saved telling you for a surprise. We are going to be married in a month and we'll live down in that bigger apartment."

Mary Delt slipped from the arms of her lover and darted across the room to Crinton's side. She wormed her way into his lap and clasped her arms about his neck. There was something about his face that hurt her; hurt her as she never before had been hurt. She misunderstood.

"Ah, Daddy Crinton, you dear, dear soul, I never should have let him do it this way. We should have told you before! Why, you're shocked to death!"

No one spoke. For the first time Tommy got an inkling of how tremendous a thing this was to the Crintons. He had not until that instant realized the cause of the unadmitted barrier between himself and Danny. A look at Danny's face told him now. Impulsively he went forward and held out his hand. Danny accepted it.

"Gee, that's—great, Tommy!" he offered in subdued tone. "I can—Gee—I can hardly—believe it!" His voice shook as he spoke. He seemed to realize that he was disclosing the stifling fires that had leaped to life within himself. Without another word he arose, passed into the hall and was gone.

Mrs. Crinton attempted to restore some balance to the gathering by chattering aimlessly about nothing. But Mary knew then, more than ever before the depths of Sergeant Crinton's love for her. She had been a daughter to him.

And in this, the most important event in her life, she had not only failed to seek his counsel, but had deprived him of early knowledge. She had hurt him.

Soon they left. There was no attempt to detain them. All realized that, for some reason, it was best that they should separate until matters had adjusted themselves in their respective minds.

Crinton kissed Mary silently as he arose to go. Then he stood awkwardly a moment, as if in doubt. Finally he pushed the girl out into the hall with his wife and turned to Tommy Rand.

"There's the finest girl that ever lived, Tommy," he said somewhat ponderously. "She's as much as a daughter to me."

"Yes, sir. She's all that."

"You're going to be very good to her, Tommy," Crinton persisted. "Better than you ever was to anybody—understand?"

"Yes, sir. Of course I am! I love her, Mr. Crinton, more than—"

"And if ever the day should come when you ain't good to her; when you forget even for a minute that she's too good for the likes of any of us—"

"But I never will!"

"If you do; mind, Tommy, if you do, I'm going to break your damned neck!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE MILLS OF THE GODS.

CRINTON bought them a parlor set that was the pride of their home. There was a deep, soft divan done in a rich mulberry color with two chairs to match. They stood it in the front room of the new apartment.

Danny got for them a rug and a lamp the shade of which matched the color of the divan.

Happiness ruled in the lives of the two. The little car served as a medium of transportation for the honeymoon.

Together they set out in the machine, driving up the Hudson to Albany.

Sight of the country with all its glorious fresh air and endless seas of foliage lent just the needed touch to Mary's happiness.

Tommy drove with his bride on to the Catskills. For the first time in her life the girl caught the meaning of the open places; of the great silences of Nature; of the miles of trees and the endless wild flowers.

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The murk seemed a thing apart; a thing forgotten; a remnant of some hideous nightmare that had passed away with the coming of day.

One week they remained in Albany, each day embracing a trip into the open that was a revelation to the girl. She saw farms that lay placid in the summer sun, green with the growth of clover and the waving stalks of corn.

The hills seemed ever to beckon to her, calling her out into their embrace where all was quiet and the sun shone with a glory that dispelled even the shadows of trees at the noontide.

Here there was no murk; no gaping hallways; no constant blanket for the hiding of the deeds of men. Here there was no impending disaster lurking.

"I love it so, Tommy," the girl cried. "Do you suppose the day will ever come when we can leave all the hateful things of the city and come to such as this with its quiet, its color, its beautiful peace and contentment?"

"But these people are farmers, honey!" Tommy answered. "What do I know about farming? I'm an accountant. I'd starve to death out here. Can you imagine me on the business end of a plow?"

They both laughed at the incongruity of the thing. Assuredly, Tommy was no farmer! But the girl persisted.

"Maybe, when our ship comes in, and you are recognized for the great man you are, we can have a little place, Tommy. Just a little place, where the flowers would grow and the sun would shine and we could be all by ourselves? And at night we could hear the crickets sing and the frogs—we'd have to have a place with a little pond on it, of course."

Then they would laugh in sheer delight and Tommy would open the gas throttle and they would whisk over the hills that the girl loved, and stop for sandwiches and cold drinks at some road stand.

Once they stopped for a meal at a farm which had a sign out *Tourists Accommodated*. They went into the old farmhouse with its huge, high rooms and its ancient, stiff furniture. The farmer complained of the drouth and talked about his cows and his horses and his fields. They loved the inflection of his voice, the drawling manner of his speech.

Mary tasted the fruits of genuine happiness for the next year. Tommy was a good husband, a lad who loved his wife with all the love that man has to give. The Crintons came often to see them, seemingly having adjusted themselves to the marriage.

Only Danny appeared morose. A change had come upon him which none could understand. He never offered any complaint of his lot. Once or twice he seemed to Mary to infer that he expected nothing more from life than the privilege of seeing her often and following the happiness she and Tommy had found.

Crinton was the same. He was a father to the girl, ever ready to advise, encourage. Tommy did well at his work. He passed Danny, in time. Five months after they were married he came home in the highest glee.

His salary had been increased from thirty dollars a week to thirty-seven-fifty. He had gone on the "monthly payroll," now. And everyone knew what that meant!

He no longer had to punch a time clock. He was on the high road to success, and when they elevated him to the higher position they had told him that it was in recognition of his good work and the belief that he would grow great in the organization.

"It's great, honey," he announced after the good news had been told. "The boss told me I had nothing to thank him for, it was all my own doing. He said the policy of the place was to reward valuable service and he was sure I'd make as good on my new job. Gee! I'm glad!"

And so Mary Rand, scarce acquainted with her new name as yet, knew happiness. She dreamed dreams that shaped themselves into wondrous pictures of the future.

They had laughed when she talked of a place in the country, but already Tommy was rising! She forgot, except at intervals, the dread murk. The home at the Glendon was all that she asked; her husband the finest she could desire.

But the mills of the gods were grinding. Elements over which neither Tommy nor

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the girl had control; elements the existence of which they failed even to suspect, were at work. At first they came in mere whisperings along the steps of the street which Mary had grown to hate and fear.

The same sagging stoops and gaping hallways received each evening the same sweaty-shirted and overall clad men with the same smelly pipes. But the talk of these men had altered. The street was tense, restless, facing impending events.

Women listened to the new words with bated breath. Men whispered cautiously, at first, then grew more courageous as their numbers grew.

They talked of the unfairness of their wage; the length of their working day. Mysterious thoughts developed, whence none knew, that started muttering about the "rights of the worker."

The saloon on the corner did an increasing business. Men talked more openly, using such phrases as "demand our rights," "show our power."

Thus the strike fever grew until men walked the street and stood in the hallways and spoke boastfully of breaking trusts and driving the bosses to do their will.

But the women were silent. They gazed upon dwindling savings accounts and reckoned the cost of food and rent. The men found unwonted courage in the corner saloon. The women bore the brunt of the trying time.

Committees met and parleyed. Then came the word that electrified the street. The bosses would not accede to the demands of the workers. If the workers dared to strike, the bosses would close their places and bring about a shutout that would starve the workers into understanding and submission.

"A bluff," became the word that passed up and down the street. "They wouldn't dare do it," "How can they make money without us?"—these and other contentious thoughts inspired the men of the steps to act. That inherent thing which will never submit stirred them.

They wanted rest, ease, a few of the luxuries of life. Now, wearied by days of endless toil, they grasped this chance for at least a temporary freedom. They struck.

The warehouses were closed. Men paced the docks, warning workers away. The street was filled with groups of men who were lost, now that time hung heavy upon their hands. A spirit of uncertainty swept over the whole locality.

The newspapers were read avidly and on one occasion, when a paper attacked the rights of the strikers to strike, a veritable army of men left the street and marched to the office of the newspaper and threw stones until the great windows clattered to the walks and the police were called to restore order.

In some distant, dissociated manner, the strike warned Mary Rand of things to come. Without tangible reason she permitted to grow within her a terrible apprehension.

Tommy was all right, he was not on strike and not expected by the strikers to go on strike. But the warehouse was closed to all business. The docks no longer clattered with the voice of commerce. The street was lined with extra police; the same police she had learned to fear when they had taken away her brother and father.

In a month Tommy admitted that he had been "laid off" until the strike was settled. Their inadequate income was now no income at all.

Mary felt the chill hand of fear that night. It gripped at the very heart of her and she felt much as though some intangible but irresistible power was reaching out from the murk and clutching at her; dragging her back, just as the hallways had seemed to threaten in the old days.

But her courage did not fail. She encouraged Tommy, told him that she felt the strike a mistake and that, in time, the men must see it and return to work and the peaceful bliss of a daily wage well earned.

But the fear within her grew and struck with deadly power when Tommy returned one night to tell her that the blow had fallen. The warehouse had been closed entirely, placed under a private guard and shut down. They had given him two weeks salary in advance and assured him that he would be welcomed to his old work when the strike ceased.

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Weeks passed. The street became a place ridden with hate and stricken by poverty. Now that the men with families were willing to relent, anxious to return to their work, the warehouses would not open the way.

"Trying to teach you a lesson of submission," was the thought presented to the haggard strikers. Hatred, in all its ramifications seeped into the worried minds. Crimes of passion altered more frequently into crimes of profit.

Sergeant Crinton bemoaned the reign of terror that had set in. Time and time again he was called upon to arrest men who had lived and labored long without yielding to temptation before now.

"Sure they're stealing for food," he offered in expiation of their deeds. "Damned if a man ain't got the right to eat!"

Over Mary Rand swept the same feeling of resignation that had ruled her mother's life on earth. There was only one thing remaining to the girl; one endless devotion and determination, and that was to stand by the man she loved. She husbanded every cent they had.

Tommy soured under the strain; the charm of home life dissolved because each knew that the other was oppressed by the same horror; the endless fear of poverty. Tommy tramped the streets by day but could find no work. By night he brooded.

In a few weeks they sold the small car. In a few more Mary Rand knew that their home at the Glendon must go. The rent was too much. She met the facts with a calm courage that was tantamount to submission.

They moved back to the dread street, and once more the girl looked out upon the murk, heard the heavy voices of the men, caught the odor of the smelly pipes and walked through the shadows of the gaping hallways.

Tommy was changing rapidly. He never laughed now. His resentment was supreme. All that he had striven for seemed lost and he became resistant even to the sympathy of Mary.

"You don't understand it, anyway," he charged. "No woman does! Just as I was getting a start, too!" Then he would sit alone all evening and the shadows outside would merge with the incessant hum of the crowded tenements.

"They won't keep me down!" he cried once, after a spell of silence. "Damn them, they can't do that! I won't live in this hell-hole, Mary. I won't do it! I'll find a way!"

Those words remained in the girl's mind. They struck horror at her very soul. "I'll find a way!" That was what her father had tried to do; and Joe! They had sought their own way out of just the sort of resentment that now gripped Tommy. Would the murk drag him down? Would he, like so many others, listen to the voice of crime? He was desperate.

Danny Crinton still called upon them. He too was out of his position, but he was living at home and did not have similar problems. He was sympathetic; entirely so. Sometimes Mary felt that he understood more than Tommy did.

One evening he called when Tommy was out. As was his custom he seated himself at the table and talked with the girl. They talked nothings at first; just talked, but there was a comfort in it for both which neither actually realized.

"Tommy is worrying, Danny," Mary said. "He can't see any end of the strike and we are dreadfully poor. Maybe we were extravagant before—but it didn't seem so then."

"No. You were all right, Mary. This thing cannot be helped. Dad says the strike is a bad one and will be worse before it's better. You might as well know!"

The girl's head fell forward on the table and she gave vent to the sobs which for days had been choking her. Danny patted her hand absently; looked off into the distance as though searching sight of relief that all knew did not exist.

"Of course, you and Tommy'll let me help, Mary. I don't have any need for money. I'll let you have what I own till the strike is over. Of course, you and Tommy ain't got anything to worry over."

As he spoke he watched the girl, waited eagerly for her answer. She gave none, only her subdued weeping.

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Before there was time to carry the subject farther Danny was lost in the enormity of his own emotions. He groped about for opportunity to do some big, some great service, to this girl. But he was blinded to the way of achievement, lost in a maze of desire and a drouth of ideas.

"Danny," said the girl finally from the seclusion of her buried face, "there's something else. Something I haven't told even Tommy. I don't know why I tell you. I don't know. I just know that I must! I'm Danny—pretty soon there'll be—another—a baby!"

A twist that might have been one of agony gripped the face of Danny Crinton. He paled a little at the words, but did not desist in patting Mary's hand.

"A baby!" his voice was tender as a woman's when he spoke. "Think of it, Mary. A baby! Gee! I bet Tommy'll be glad!"

They sat quietly for several moments, the girl's sobs diminishing now that she had shared her secret with some one.

"It seemed as though you'd understand, Danny," she whispered after a time. "I wanted to tell you."

"I'm glad to know—don't cry, Mary. Gee, please don't cry. You're tearing the heart right out of me, Mary! But don't worry any. It's no time for worry now. Whatever you and Tommy need I'll see that you get. I've saved quite a little, Mary—quite a little. I don't know why, exactly—I never expected to want it for anything! Guess I just saved it because I didn't care about spending it. And if that ain't enough, dad has any more you'll need.

"Won't you—go back to—the Glendon, Mary?"

The sound of footsteps in the hall interrupted further talk. They heard the voice of Tommy. Some one was with him. They knocked at the door and Danny rose to greet them.

"Hello, Danny," said Tommy gruffly. "Meet Mickey Dier. This is Danny Crinton, Mickey. He and I are old pals! This is the wife—what's the matter, honey? You been crying!"

Mary smiled wanly toward the newcomer and tried to assure Tommy as he took her in his arms.

"Mary's got something wonderful to tell you, Tommy," Danny cut in. "I guess if she's crying it's tears of joy!"

Mary took her husband's arm and led him into another room while Danny talked with Dier.

"Damn nice boy, Tommy," Dier remarked as he fished tobacco and papers from his pocket and deftly wrapped a cigarette. "Hell of a nice kid. I like him."

When Danny made no answer the other continued.

"I'm one of the private dicks that is watching the warehouse. I been down there ever since they closed the joint down and it's easy dough! I hope the strike never ends, so far as I'm concerned!" He laughed easily.

"I been telling Tommy that I know the boss darn well and we might get him a job there. Me and the boss are old pals and I'll use my pull—I like the kid! We're going down there and see what's doing."

Tommy led Mary into the room at that moment. There was something of the old look on Tommy's face and Mary's eyes carried a light that bespoke the heights of a woman's emotions.

"Danny, old boy," Tommy grinned, "there ain't a thing to be said but I guess you know what I'm thinking!" He drew Mary close and kissed her cheek.

"I've got to go out with Mickey for about an hour. Stay here and keep Mary company till I can get back, will you? Mickey and I have a job to do that may chase away the clouds for awhile."

"I don't like that man," Mary said slowly after the two had gone. "Tommy says that he may get him a job. If he does I'll never end thanking him—but I don't like his looks, or the way he talks."

"Me either!" Danny grunted. "Mary, if you don't mind, I guess I won't stay tonight. I don't know what it is but something has—upset me, I guess. Remember what I said—go back to the Glendon. You were mighty happy there—won't you let me do just that little bit? Please do—Mary."

He touched her hand fleetingly and was gone. For a long time Mary stood still watching the door through which Danny had passed.

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"A wonderful lad, Danny," she mused then. "God bless him. He's so upset over it all—just like a little boy, he is. It must be what I told him!"

CHAPTER V.

MURK.

MICKEY DIER was unsuccessful in his first efforts to obtain work for Tommy. He came often to the house, however, and talked hopefully of what he might do later on.

"There's a flock of guys outa work," he admonished Mary for seeming impatience. "A lot of these big bankers and guys like that has got together on this thing now and they are standing solid with the owners of the warehouses. The idea is to break labor's will! A job is a hard thing to get—but I'll get it for Tommy sooner or later."

Then he would wink one eye in a suggestive manner that seemed to imply some strange and unknown power which, through his effort, was to be brought to bear. It seemed to Mary that he was endeavoring to make Tommy and herself believe that, in his own good time, he was going to put to rout the bankers and others to whom he referred.

But this was far from the result he achieved in the girl's mind. She learned to mistrust the wink; to sense the furtive leer that seemed to hang about the face of the man. Once or twice she mentioned this to Tommy, but he brushed aside her fears.

"He's the only bet left me, Mary!" he complained. "Mickey is all right, in his way. Sometimes I don't like him very well myself. But he's doing all he can to get me a job. Something's got to come soon, honey! Food and rent and — the baby coming along.

"My God! I'm growing desperate—really desperate. I've done nothing wrong yet here I am about to starve and making you live in a dive like this!"

"Things will change, Tommy," Mary consoled. "Everyone must have their troubles. The only fear I have is that you *will* get desperate, dear! There seems to be something about this place that makes a person do that—Father and Joe—others, too—it seems like folks can't stand it long. Daddy Crinton says many a man is doing wrong things now who never would have done them but for the strike.

"You'll be very careful, Tommy, won't you? You won't let a minute's discouragement and recklessness—"

"I'm no crook, Mary!"

"Of course not! But the times are so trying, Tommy. And I don't like this Mickey Dier. I don't trust him. I appreciate all he is trying to do for us, dear. Don't misunderstand me. But I can't stand his way of winking.

"It—well, it reminds me someway of the blinking gaslights in the hallways, and the darting, slinking shadows that creep about the alleys after night has come."

"You've worried yourself into a lot of fool ideas," Tommy offered a bit roughly. "Any fellow that has a chance to get me a job is the best kind of a friend right now."

"I'm sorry you can't see what I mean," the girl persisted. "It's a queer thing to express. But anything, Tommy; anything that looks at home in this locality is a dangerous thing to trust. Even the sidewalks tip when you walk on them!

"So it is with Mickey Dier. He is of the murk; he feels at home here. He belongs, just like the shadows—"

"Nonsense! Now please don't add to all my troubles by whining about my friends, Mary! God knows I've enough to think about without that! Where in hell is food coming from if I don't get money pretty soon?

"What have I ever done to have to face conditions like this? It ain't right, Mary. Damned if I can stand it much longer; damned if I will stand it much longer!"

There seemed an implied threat in Tommy's tone and words alike. Something deep within Mary's heart stirred and brought forth memories of the night her brother and her father had scoffed at the law. They had been in somewhat the same mental frame that her husband was now disclosing.

With an almost furtive attitude the girl fastened her gaze upon the window overlooking the yard below. Then she arose

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and went close to her husband and silently ran her fingers through his hair.

"Honey, I don't mean to be rough," he assured her. "I don't think you know what it means to a man to see his wife living like this just because he can't get the money for her to live right. I don't think you know how I scheme and hope and pray."

"It's a time we need all our love, Tommy," she said simply. "Think of those who must go through the same thing without even that! They are the ones who suffer most. So long as we have each other we have more than most anything else."

He arose and slipped his arms about her, drawing her close. He looked long into her face and, as he did, the lines about his own mouth softened and the glint of his eyes moderated into a mellow affection that transfigured his whole countenance.

"Little wonder!" he whispered tenderly. "Little wonder. Surely no one, no matter how much money he may have, is as rich as I. I'm sorry if I frightened you; if I was thoughtless. Can't you see it's just the nagging thoughts and the howling of the wolf at our door, dear? I'm hardly myself.

"I didn't realize, Mary, how this thing had got you, too. I can see it now. You are tired, dear. Your face is almost haggard. You need rest and change and fresh air."

The look of the girl checked his speech. Mary was, somehow, different than he ever before had seen her. Her face held something that seemed to well up from a hidden source within her. There was a new strength about her; a new conviction. It was a something that held him, expectant.

"That window," the girl said slowly. "Look through it, Tommy. What do you see? Darkness. Walk over to it and look down into the littered yard that has become a familiar sight to us. What do you see? How well we know!

"But there is something which we don't see there, Tommy. Something that never lets itself be seen until it has wrought its own havoc in the lives of those it touches. It is as silent as it is deadly, Tommy. It creeps forth from every nook and corner of the ramshackle tenements, it lurks in every hallway and darkened alley, it sputters in every gas jet that lights our stumbling way through life."

"Why, Mary!"

"Don't stop me, Tommy! Please. Let me tell you this thing which is deep in my heart. I don't think you see it. I don't think all these poor devils that go wrong see it until it has swept them down. It is like a monster, Tommy; a monster that cannot be combated because it devours slowly and we are not warned until it is too late.

"It sent father and Joe away; it killed mother; it started this terrible strike; it blights little children; it dashes the hopes and dreams of these strange people who come from foreign countries; it chills the ambitions of such as you and me, Tommy.

"Can't you see it all? Can't you see that even now it is reaching out and twining its mighty fingers around us; around us and the little baby that soon will come?"

Her voice rang with a vibrance that thrilled and frightened him. He could think of no answer. His fear showed as she looked into his eyes.

"Ah, Tommy! Must you be so blind? Must you fear for me because I voice this thing which is tearing the soul of me apart? Can't you see this monster; sense its presence every moment of the day and night? Can't you see what it is that makes the ceaseless odors of the street; blots out the sunshine; twists the minds of men and sends women clattering along the road to despair? Won't you see it, Tommy?

"Won't you look at the things in the very stores of the street; the lettuce that was sweet and green in the country, grown shabby, wilted and blighted under the touch of this thing? Won't you see the traces of it on the buildings, the windows, the very street itself?

"Tommy, that is what is to be feared. Not hunger, not poverty, not hard work, not illness, not discouragement, for they are but the tiniest offshoots of this monster! It is the constant, lurking blanketing haze of hell that hangs over us that is to be feared! It wilts the soul even as it wilts the greens from the soil. It brands everything as its own and then uses everything for the working of its terrible deeds.

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"At night it whispers in weakened ears, and it never whispers of good. By day it keeps out the sun and seeps through the haunts of men, making them work its havoc at night. I see it, Tommy. I have felt, God knows, the icy touch of its fingers. I know it for what it is. A killer; a withering blast straight from the fires of hell and I hate it, hate it, hate it!"

"Honey, girl—come, sit down and rest," Tommy faltered. He had discovered a new side to Mary, a side that finally had rebelled against the thing which she had feared most and which had robbed her of the dearest things in life. Now she was on the verge of hysteria. He was frightened for her.

"No!" she plunged on. "I will say what is to be said. If it is the last thing I ever do I will make you see this thing as I see it. You are all that is left to me, Tommy; all. Soon there will be another—ours! A tiny, helpless, little thing that will cry out for light and air and sunshine, Tommy. Our baby!

"Which shall it be, the monster or the baby? Laugh if you will, scoff if you dare, but that is the fact. You will be the father of that little tot, Tommy. I will be the mother. Shall we fail in that holy relationship? Has not God himself trusted us with that life?

"Don't think me suddenly mad! This is no new thought. If you could but know the hours I have spent gazing through that window and thinking, thinking, thinking! Am I to be made a mere breeder for the hell haze? Is my baby to be laid upon the altar of the whispering shadows and am I to see its soul wilt as the greens on the filthy stands of the street?

"No, Tommy! Not if I live. Not if there is a God! Not if I have first to take from the baby the very life I am giving it! Never, never shall it grow into a creature of the shadows; a creature who will wink as this Mickey Dier winks and whose very hands and fingers move with a gliding that shows a desire for stealth.

"You've got to see this, Tommy! You've got to! Do you know what Daddy Crinton calls it? Murk! *Murk!* God, how the name and the fact ring in my ears! You cannot let it suck you down. You will not if you are warned in time, if you see the thing as I see it.

"Never mind the poverty. Never mind the loss of things we had learned to love. We have lost nothing so long as we keep that which will let our baby look into our eyes and smile, Tommy; smile because it has a mother and a father to be proud of. I must never have anything in my life that baby may not know!"

Mary Rand had exhausted herself. The fire of her impassioned plea had burned out the energy that had so suddenly prompted it. The force of it and the stark realization that the mere wording of it had forced upon her, gripped her more vitally than it did Tommy.

She sank into a chair, her face fell forward upon her arms and she wept again. Great sobs shook every fiber of her body and brought her husband's arms about her in an embrace that carried more than words possibly could have.

Tommy's glance roamed about the room. There was a wild look in his eyes, a sort of groping for some way out of the situation into which Fate seemed to have plunged them. He knew then, suddenly, that there was a menace about the street, a thing which hitherto might have been intangible but which now, following the fiery words of Mary, suddenly loomed before him in stark reality.

His look gave evidence of a searching of his own soul. What he found there reflected in a jerky moistening of the lips, a convulsive patting of his wife's shoulder.

A long time they sat thus. Then steps sounded on the stairs and Tommy listened as they stopped outside their door.

"It's Mickey Dier," came Mary's muffled voice. "His feet slide along the floor; I'd know his step anywhere."

The girl went into another room as Tommy admitted the man.

"Kinda late for a call, Tommy," Mickey announced. "Where's the fair and charming wifie—gone to bed? Say—whatsa matter? Look like you just saw a ghost or something!"

"I—I— Nope, I didn't see a ghost, Mickey. I guess Mary did, though!"

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"Women pull that kinda stuff every so often, I guess." Mickey winked understandingly. "It's their nature. Can't help it." He rolled himself a cigarette regardless of the stream of yellow flakes that fell to the floor during the process. "Git me a mitt full of matches, Tommy, will you? I ain't got a blame one."

Tommy did as requested and refused a cigarette.

"I think there's something stirring tonight, Tommy," Dier offered, the words accompanied by another wink. "The old man is down around the warehouses and I told him I was going to bring you around to let him take a peek at you, see? Better grab your lid and we'll run down there and give the thing the once-over. There's a good chance I can grab off a job for you because the old boy got warmed up this afternoon and fired two of the guys."

Tommy went into the other room and returned with his cap. "I'll tell Mary," he said slowly. "Wait a minute, Mickey."

When he came out his face was set in determination; there was also something of resentment in his expression. His shoulders swayed almost to the point of swagger. He had the air and appearance of a man who has asserted himself and is acting in accordance with his own best judgment in violation of that of others.

"Come on, Mickey," he snapped. "You're right. Women do get the damnedest ideas." The door slammed after them.

For nearly an hour Mary Rand sat in the squalid bedroom. Squalid it was, but not because of lack of cleanliness on her part. The bed linen showed white, yet streaked, too, with the breath of the murk, for it was not possible to bleach things hung out to dry in the yard of the tenement.

The squalor was rather a matter of time and its impress upon the wall paper, the floors, the woodwork. The room could never be anything but squalid and the raucous effort of the bright wall paper to reflect light that was not but augmented the inconsistency thus created.

Finally she arose and walked slowly into the parlor. Her face was set so that new lines traced themselves into a picture such as an artist might paint who is intent upon reproducing reality.

The fingers of the murk had laid their blight upon the heart of Mary Rand. She cringed before it; walked unsteadily to the darkened window and gazed out into the haze as one might look upon a serpent through the glass of a cage.

Out in that leering murk was all that made life livable for Mary Rand. Tommy was gone with a man the girl instinctively distrusted, a man she felt very certain belonged to the things which occurred under cover of the murk.

She imagined the wink that seemed a part of him. A shudder passed through her body. Then, even as her mother had done before her, she resignedly drew a chair to the window and sat there to wait.

Her arms twisted inward so that the elbows might rest in her lap. Her eyes peered into the darkness as though trying to see past the spectrum given human eyes to embrace. Somehow she knew that great events were brewing; and great events were always terrible events in the murk.

So she waited for the return of her husband, who was occupied she knew not how. And as she waited she prayed.

Silently, earnestly, beseechingly, Mary Rand prayed. She prayed for the safety of her husband. She prayed to a God in Whom she had full faith and belief, for surcease from the murk and its clinging menace.

Time passed unheeded as the girl sat there at the window. Great thoughts came and fled through her harassed mind. Inspirations, the source of which she paused not to consider, set her mind and her veins afire. Imagination painted fanciful pictures upon which her eyes gazed as one might look upon a panoramic vista of life's events.

The maternal in her roused. She altered then from a girl to a woman. She felt the soft warmth of a tiny body at her breast, knew the tremendous urge of approaching motherhood and felt like the mother creature must always feel when called upon to defend her young against danger.

To Mary Rand that danger was fright-

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fully real. It was so real, in fact, that she quailed before it even as she girded herself for the struggle ahead.

"I need help," she muttered, ultimately. "God knows I need help. I cannot stay here—Tommy cannot stay here. Baby must never, never know this thing which palls upon me. It must never see the murk. I will go to Danny—we will pocket pride—He will help."

She arose, half-stumbled into the bedroom and returned shortly with her hat and coat. Then into the narrow hall she went, her eyes afire with a nameless terror. Never had the place offered ogres of imagination so frightful as they did at that moment. She felt that she was fleeing from them.

"Tommy might come back," she murmured as she hesitated at the head of the shadowy stairs. "It is frightfully late—he should be home."

But the thought did not long deter her. A mighty surge seemed to have gripped her. She wanted to see Danny; to have him tell her that they could go back to the Glendon, she and Tommy, and that her baby could be born away from the murk. She wanted Mrs. Crinton; she felt the overpowering need of a womanly caress, a woman's understanding.

Out into the street, through the litter of the day and the shadows of the night, she walked. Once or twice she stumbled on the uneven pavement.

Several times she was obliged to step into the street in order to pass unmolested the men whose voices were heavy with the weight of liquor and whose words mouthed a foolish bravado against the warehouse owners. Mary knew how quickly that bravado would melt away with the passing of the liquor fumes. She knew, too, that the purchase of the liquor had brought just so much nearer to hunger the women and children of the murk.

Mrs. Crinton greeted her at the door.

"Faith, child, I was about to be off to bed! 'Tis a late hour for you to be abroad in these times, Mary! It can't be—Mary darlin' is there trouble?"

Mary Rand attempted to speak. Words would not come. Mrs. Crinton, with the innate understanding of women who themselves have traveled into the morass of despair, opened her comforting arms and Mary Rand slipped into them. Tears came; but even as she wept Mary knew that here was a haven at least for the moment.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HELL HAZE.

THE elder Crinton was out. Most of his time he now spent at the station house where were brought those unfortunates whose deeds were beyond the pale. The lieutenant was aging under the stress of the times. His duty was ever his duty and, as such, a thing supreme. But it had its distasteful hours and such were these.

Danny also was out. His mother did not know where. Mary was thankful that she had found the woman alone. They could talk better, more fully. For a long time they said but little.

Mary was afraid to voice the uncertain fears which wrought the havoc in her soul. She could not put them into words.

Tommy had not understood her meaning when she spoke of the murk as a thing alive and insidious. Neither, probably, would Mrs. Crinton.

"The old man is unhappy, child," Mrs. Crinton lamented presently. "There never has been worse days, so there hasn't! The papers call it a crime wave, they do. But the old man says it ain't that really. He says it's a bread line that refuses to form! He says the men that are doing the robbing and the pilfering are men willing enough, now, to work and who can't get the chance.

"They are stealing for food, they are, child. For food! Sure it strikes terror into the soul of a body! What are we coming to, I want to know? Where is it all to end?"

"The men won't take alms. But they are foolish, Mrs. Crinton. They should look in the right place for their help. Why cannot they come out with something other than silly threats and idle boasts?

"If they went in a body and presented their case they most certainly would be

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heard and somewhere, somehow, some one would work out relief for them. Why do they not go to the police before they commit crime? People cannot be allowed to starve in the streets!"

"Faith I don't know, duckling," Mrs. Crinton bemoaned. "But it's the truth that such are no thoughts for your pretty head to be worried about right now! Troubles are most always as big as we make 'em. Let's not be after building up yours!"

"They are no longer mine alone," Mary said listlessly.

"There'll be a way out, chickie. There always is," the older woman insisted. "Sure I'm wishin' Danny was home right now. Poor Tommy'll be getting back and wondering what's caught up and run off with his bride, that he will. Danny would take you home, honey."

"I don't want to go back there to-night, Mother Crinton. I can't go back! There is something there that frightens me, some horrible thing that hangs over the place every second. I can't tell exactly what it is myself. But it's there. It never leaves. It's like a cloud that hangs in the sky, but it never goes away because there's no air or sunshine to blow it away or absorb it.

"I'm afraid of it. Terribly afraid, Mother Crinton! I've gone all to pieces. Tommy went out in that cloud to-night and he went with a man I fear. He has a wink, that man; a wink just like the flicker of a gas light in those dreary halls.

"Can you possibly know what I mean? —I'm not a coward, Mother Crinton, honestly I'm not a coward—but that terrible thing is there and people don't see it. They walk through it, breathe it, live in it and then it reaches out and strikes them down and Daddy Crinton sees them being brought into the station!"

"Faith, dear kiddie, your old mother don't have belief in spirits such as that!" Mrs. Crinton laughed, but there was a note in her laughter just as there was a look in her eyes which bespoke a grave concern for the girl.

"It isn't a spirit I mean. Maybe you can't see it there. It's the endless haze. Daddy Crinton calls it murk. It doesn't put bad thoughts into your mind exactly; it just crowds good thoughts out because it makes you morose and tired and weary and hungry—hungry for the good thoughts and the clean air and the fine sunshine—that's what I mean, Mother Crinton.

"And when all the good thoughts are gone then the murk reaches out and lays hold upon men and they do those things which bring the police and throw open the doors of the prisons."

"You're not fearing for Tommy, child!" cried Mrs. Crinton.

"I don't know! He went out with that man; the man who speaks of everything as though there were more to it than he is saying. He infers so much and says so little!"

The older woman thought matters over for a few moments then came to a quick decision in characteristic manner.

"We'll be going back to your house, Mary. I'll run along with you, just leaving a note for Danny or the old man in case they come in. I'll be staying there to-night, honey. You got thoughts bothering you that ain't any place in your mind. You need a mother, like most of us do at times."

Mary was thankful. She sat very quiet while Mrs. Crinton prepared to return to the tenement with her. As she waited the clang of a patrol wagon bell rang through the night. Once more the preservers of order were being called upon to drag away to prison some one whose resistance had waned and who had yielded to the voice of the murk. She shuddered.

They walked back through the dark street. Mrs. Crinton known to all the people nearly as well as her husband was, had little to fear from possible molesters.

Late as it was the men had not entirely disappeared from the dingy steps. They knotted into groups and talked by turn. One would be cautious, afraid of the doom that seemed standing before him and his family. Others would shout and swear and charge the warehouse owners with every sort of crime.

From the hallways could be heard the motley sounds of all congested areas. Here the cry of a child as it stirred or waked; there the voices of tired elders unable to

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sleep and who gathered at windows and talked. In many tongues they talked, these dwellers in the murk, but the topic was generally identical. The strike; poverty; uncertainty.

Never had it all been so repugnant to Mary Rand. Her very soul revolted against it. She clung silently to Mrs. Crinton's arm as they walked through it. In memory Mary went back to a previous night when she had walked thus to her home. That time she had seen the police take her father and brother away and leave her mother a broken thing fortunately ignorant of the shame which had come upon her.

Mary had a premonition that some similar disaster was now in store for her. The fear arose from no definite thing in her mind. It was strange impulse of divination that sometimes appears to cast aside the curtain of the future for a fleeting second.

It was a fortunate thing. In a sense it prepared the girl for the last great blow that was to be her offering from the murk. By the time she reached her home she had attained a certain placidity of mind that fortified her against whatever presented. While yet she was some distance from the tenement she voiced her presentiment.

"Something terrible has happened, Mother Crinton," she said, and the dread listlessness of her tone persisted. "I don't know what, or where, nor to whom, but the thing which I see from the window over the yard has already struck at us and we are going now just to find how terrible has been its blow!"

"Hush, child! Faith, your mind is in a riot of worry and in the morning we'll laugh at all this talk, betimes! Sure we'll find poor Tommy there frightened to death at the loss of his acushla, that we will. Then we'll talk a mite and after that we'll chase away this bugaboo of yours and sleep."

But Mary was not to be consoled. Her face became more deeply lined. Mrs. Crinton's side glances at the girl caused the elder woman to catch her breath. What change was this taking place in happy Mary Rand?

The face of the girl was as haggard as that of the women who lined the doorways and listened to their menfolk boast. It bore, suddenly, the fingerprints of the murk; the verging of a surrender to powers beyond combating.

At the door of the tenement Mrs. Crinton, too, went pale. There were police there.

Their badges glistened ominously in the dim light, their feet shuffled scrapingly over the gritty floor of the hallway as they waited. Waited for what?

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

RESULTS OF THE VOTE ON "MIX AND SERVE"

In response to our request that readers indicate their choice of the movie actor to play *Henry Wells* in Edgar Franklin's latest serial, "Mix and Serve," we had replies from all over the country, and among the players mentioned were Richard Dix, Matt Moore, Thomas Meighan, Johnnie Hines, Creighton Hale, John Gilbert, Richard Barthelmess, Charles Ray, Douglas McLean and Reginald Denny, with the latter having the greater number of votes. It was Mr. Denny, by the way, who starred in Mr. Franklin's last story to be filmed—"Where Was I?"

We take this opportunity to thank our readers for their letters and to express our regrets that we have not space at this time to print extracts therefrom, but we are retaining them, as well as those we received in regard to "Flight to the Hills," and it is quite possible we may publish excerpts later on.—THE EDITOR.

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Tangled Trails.

By GEORGE M. JOHNSON

Author of "Stan Willis, Cowboy," "The Rustler," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

CHAPTER I.

NOT A FAIR EXCHANGE.

THE young cow-puncher and his roan broncho, an animal wiry, lean, and trail-hardened, paused at the brink of a steep-sloped cañon. For some miles the rider had been following this cañon, vainly seeking a spot where the walls might break away sufficiently to permit a descent on horseback.

The plateau surface through which he rode bore evidence on all sides of recent rains; grass was everywhere showing green and a multitude of tiny flowers blossomed forth, taking grateful advantage of the respite from drought. There was no sign, however, of actual water, for evaporation had sucked dry the scattered hollows and depressions in the rocks. It was now more than twelve hours since horse or rider had tasted water.

The cowboy gazed steadily down into the cañon, his eyes catching a silvery gleam reflected through the clustered pines far below—proof that water was to be had if one cared to pay the price in toil.

"Looks like I got to amble down afoot," he sighed. "That is, if I drink. You're in luck one way, Mex," he added to the pony. "And if the going ain't too rough, I'll bring you up a snifter in my hat. Here goes." And leaving his mount effectively anchored by the dropped bridle reins, the cowboy began a precarious climb downward into the torrid, sun-drenched depths of the cañon.

"She'll be a pile harder coming up," he muttered. "Feet, on your way!"

This rather perilous descent being managed without mishap, the puncher drank deeply, bathing face and arms in the refreshing coolness. Then he relaxed for a few minutes in idle enjoyment, puffing con-

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tentedly on a cigarette manufactured expertly from the inevitable makings always carried by his tribe.

At length he rose with a sigh of regret at thought of the hard climb ahead, filled his canteen and broad-brimmed hat, and started.

It spoke well for the rider's care of his horse that he took particular pains not to spill the precious fluid he carried. Sweat-soaked, he gained the plateau, where he stopped in stupefied astonishment.

The roan broncho left behind had been mysteriously metamorphosed into a piebald bay.

The puncher blinked, shaking his head vigorously as if under the impression that the heat and his brain must be leagued together to play him tricks. Then he looked again. The horse, still an unmistakable piebald, returned his blank stare inquiringly.

"Looks like I've made a swap, sort of," shrewdly sizing up his acquisition. "Not a bad-appearing bronc, at that, though I ain't saying but what I'd rather have old Mex. Still, Mex had his faults."

The horse smelled the water in the hat of its new owner, and nickered faintly.

"Thirsty, huh?" and the rider extended his dripping Stetson. "No use throwing it away, after me taking all the trouble to get the stuff 'way up here. Drink hearty, hoss, long's it lasts." Then he added reflectively: "Hope the chap that's borrowed my cayuse so casual like will do the same by him."

Whereupon he mounted and pursued his way, puzzling over this unexplained exchange in horseflesh.

The animal abandoned to him had obviously been ridden hard, but was younger and on the whole in fully as good condition as Mex. The saddle was a splendid one, too. Certainly the unknown person had not profited by the transfer.

"I don't mind swapping hosses now and then," our rider grumbled to himself. "But seems like a fellow ought to be consulted. Strikes me that shorthorn was powerful anxious to trade and be on his way again. I got a hunch they may be a durned good reason."

The sun was slipping beneath the distant horizon, painting the sky with a blaze of barbaric colors, when the solitary rider's meditations received a rude jolt.

"Elevate 'em, French!"

A large, heavy-set man stood in the trail before him, the yawning muzzle of a Colt centered on the puncher's chest. A scowl curled the man's lips. It was evident that he rather hoped for an excuse to use his weapon.

The rider's eyes narrowed as he considered the individual who thus threatened his passage. Yet he made no move toward the pistol hanging at his own belt; the play had gone against him, and an attempt at gun pulling under the circumstances was equivalent to suicide, a fact which he prudently recognized.

"What's the game?" he asked in mild inquiry.

"Stick 'em up," the other rasped, "or I'll let a little sunset stream plumb through your miserable hide. You've come to the end of the trail, French."

"I sure like to be accommodating," and the hands went up. "But," plaintively, "looks like you've mixed your dope some way. I ain't got the pleasure of being acquainted with this French party you mention. Not whatever." Then to himself: "I knew they was a joker hooked to that hoss swap back there. This here's it, I reckon."

His captor emitted an unbelieving grunt, moving briskly forward to secure the prisoner's gun, which he thereupon emptied into the air—two shots close together, then one, giving the signal twice.

"If this French guy is some one you want downright bad," the captive suggested hopefully, "you better start swift like for the north side of Plum Cañon. I judge from the sign that's the way he went."

"Look a'here, hombre," came the harsh retort, "I don't want anything out of you but silence, and I want a damned lot of that! Nothing you can say will help you out of the mess you're in. Savvy?"

"I reckon I do."

"All right, then. Come along."

The speaker's horse was concealed behind a large bowlder beside the trail, and he indicated the direction. With a brisk,

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"Let's move," the big fellow swung to the saddle."

A quarter hour of riding brought them to a small group of men waiting expectantly at a trail fork. In malevolent triumph they glared at the prisoner.

"Any trouble?" asked one, who seemed in command of the posse.

"Not a bit," was the response. "He's a regular lamb, this chap. I covered him, and his arms went up like pump handles."

"Probably rather do his own gun slinging when the other lad ain't expecting it. The way he got Chet. That's a good job, Wally."

"And I say let's make a good finish of it by swinging him to the first tree we strike," another suggested.

"Plenty time for that in the morning," said the leader. "We'll take him back to the ranch to-night."

The prisoner had remained an appreciative listener during this brief colloquy.

"If you gents will kindly pardon my curiosity," he now drawled, "I'd sure be proud to learn what crime I've committed; likewise who I'm supposed to be. I'm beginning to sort of lose track of myself."

"What's your alibi on that shooting?"

"Alibi?" the captive repeated. "How can I tell till I hear the evidence? Why, I don't even know who I am yet."

The leader of the gang scowled at the lightness of his tone.

"This is a serious business, young fellow, as you'll soon find. What I'm about to tell you ain't new, I judge, but it 'll show you how much we know and what we've got on you. It's a plenty. My name is Bradford Hastings, owner of the Boxed Triangle, south from here. Last evening my foreman, Chet Randall—one of the finest riders that ever straddled a saddle—was shot down by a reptile who goes by the name of Bert French. In other words, he was shot by you. And since we've got you, you can imagine what to expect. It's a long way to a judge, and we haven't much time. So—" He paused significantly.

"So old Judge Lynch will be sitting on the bench, eh?" the captive finished. "But is this Bert French a twin of mine? Seems funny him and me look so much alike."

"He's near enough like you to satisfy us—and he rode a piebald with a little crack in its left fore hoof. The ground was still soft from the rain, and we trailed the cayuse into this section."

"Likely you got the cayuse, all right, but he's swapped riders since last night," and the prisoner briefly related what had happened to him on the edge of the plateau. His hearers remained unimpressed.

"Naturally we'd expect you to cook up some story to account for the horse," Hastings told him.

The man who had made the capture now spoke up.

"Here's the gun I took from him," said he. "Cut in the butt is B. F. That ought to stand for Bert French."

"Course it couldn't stand for anything else." The prisoner's voice expressed elaborate sarcasm. "Being's this slippery Mr. French has a monopoly on all names beginning with them letters. All my life I been accustomed to hearing folks speak of me as Ben Fowler, which is what the B. F. brand on my shooting iron stands for."

"Now, look here," said Hastings; "suppose you were in our place; suppose you'd trailed a murderer by the tracks of his horse and caught a man riding that same horse, also wearing a gun in the butt of which was carved the initials of the guilty man; suppose further that this party told a cock-and-bull story like the one you've just told us. Would you believe it?"

"No," Ben Fowler rejoined thoughtfully, "I don't believe I would. It's a little too smooth."

"That's it, exactly—too smooth. Which is why we still adhere to the notion that you're Bert French, scheduled to swing off in the near future for the murder of Chet Randall."

"You know French pretty well?"

"No. None of us know him by sight. He belongs over Painted Rocks way."

"How come you're so certain he shot the foreman—being's none of you know him by sight?"

"Chet knew him, and Chet lived long enough to tell us who did the shooting. Anything more you want to know?"

"Why, my thirst for information ain't

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quenched by a whole lot, but it don't seem much use in gratifying it unduly. If you all have your hearts plumb set on hanging me for a job I never did—for killing a man I never saw—why, my evidence ain't apt to be taken serious."

"You're talking sense," said Hastings, and without further discussion the cavalcade set out on its journey to the Boxed Triangle.

"Old-timer," Ben Fowler grimly mused to himself, "you've sure bit off a big hunk you never expected. It ought to be a lesson to you. Stick to your own range where folks know you—and next time you're thirsty take your cayuse along, too."

It was dark when the party of horsemen swung in among a cluster of buildings which formed the Boxed Triangle. The prisoner's arms were tied behind his back and he was put in a stoutly constructed outhouse, built of logs, without windows. The substantial door was fastened by a hasp and padlock. No guard was posted, as escape from such a jail was considered impossible—and with good reason.

The thoughts which flitted through the brain of young Mr. Ben Fowler, after his captors left him to his own meditations, were of a somber trend. The knowledge that one has excellent chances of being hanged the next morning is indeed not especially gratifying, and the sensitive soul instinctively shrinks from contemplation of so crude an adventure.

"If these fellows weren't so dag-goned impetuous," he told himself, "I might get word over beyond the Bitter Springs country and have one of the Flying Z riders come around and identify me. But the way things are shaping up now, they won't be nothing but a corpse to identify. The Boxed Triangle outfit would probably feel terrible humiliated at their mistake, but that wouldn't help me a heap. Oh, well, it's all in a lifetime. I ain't the first party to be hung while the rightful candidate was pouring himself across the open range, seeking seclusion."

The faint patter of raindrops sounded on the roof above him, and like any true cowman Fowler's thoughts turned to its effect on the cattle industry.

"She's sure a good season," he mused. "Getting so it rains every two-three days. Be a lot of fat steers on the range this year." Which, in turn, again brought home the unpleasant fact that in all probability his place on the fall round-up would be vacant.

The slow hours dragged past, and at length the prisoner fell into a troubled sleep, despite his uncomfortable, trussed-up condition. Yet young Mr. Fowler was ever a light sleeper, and of a sudden he sat bolt upright, conscious that something had startled him, though not knowing what it was. He had no idea as to the time, or how long he had been asleep.

Then the heavy door swung slowly open and a shadowy figure invaded the darkness of the small building.

"Be quiet!" a low voice commanded.

Ben felt a knife passed over the rope which bound him, and his arms were free from the tight bands. Silently his rescuer guided him from the building toward two horses, waiting a short distance away. The rain had ceased, though the sky was still covered by clouds. One spot, a shade less dark, marked the position of the moon; it had been full a week before.

A half sob escaped the lips of Ben's guide, and for the first time he became aware of the intriguing fact that his deliverer was a girl.

"Did you have to do it, Bert?" she whispered, to which Ben Fowler discreetly made no response, strongly impressed with the truth of that old adage which emphasizes the golden value of silence.

"The plot is sure boiling over," he told himself.

The girl made no more attempt at conversation, and shortly afterward the two mounted and rode off into the enveloping blackness under her leadership, to which Ben readily yielded. Any port in a storm was his motto at that particular instant.

Once at a safe distance from the Boxed Triangle buildings, the girl spurred her horse to a reckless gallop, Ben following. Several miles were thus covered, after which she slackened the pace slightly, dropping back even with Ben's mount.

"I don't want you to misunderstand me,

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Bert," she said, speaking tensely. "I've been a fool—a heedless little fool—to imagine the feeling I had for you was love. I don't love you. Sometimes I think I almost hate you. I ought to hate you for killing poor Chet—except that I saw him draw his gun first. Truly, I hoped you'd get away, and when dad came in to-night and said they'd caught you, I nearly fainted, because I knew it meant hanging."

Her horse slowed to a jog as she spoke, her voice vibrant with the speaker's earnestness. Ben Fowler found himself strangely thrilling to the sound of that voice. He strained his eyes through the dimness, seeking to catch a glimpse of her face.

"I couldn't bear to think of any other deaths—on my account. No girl is worth that, Bert—so—this is what I did. It is the end, a final good-by. Kiss me once, Bert, in memory of the happy afternoon we spent together on the slopes of Castle Butte."

She lifted her face to Ben, who, nothing loath, enthusiastically bent near to grant in full measure her wholly reasonable request.

Alas for his hopes! Just at that instant the faithless moon broke through the vanishing clouds. Its light was feeble, but it was enough. The girl uttered a gasp of mingled astonishment and affright, one hand involuntarily clutching at her breast.

"Why—why—you're not Bert French at all!" she cried.

"Whoever said I was, ma'am?" Ben Fowler rejoined coolly.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAIL WINDS ON.

THOUGH she doubtless did not know it, Ben Fowler's companion made a most appealing picture, there, with the pale moonlight streaming down upon her.

Ben gazed with a hungry curiosity, eager to see what sort of girl this was who had come into his life under such strange and romantic circumstances. Her lips were parted, eyes wide open, as in a panic she returned his stare.

Ben could perceive the rapid rise and fall of her breast, evidence of the trepidation she would naturally feel. She was slight—almost to the point of seeming frail—but there was about her slim figure a suggestion of lithe grace and strength.

"What have I done?" she gasped. "Who are you?"

"Taking your questions in order, ma'am," Ben answered, "I'll say first that you've done me a considerable favor; second, my name is Ben Fowler."

She seemed hardly to hear; Ben saw a thin line of tiny white teeth biting her lips. In her eyes gleamed tears of humiliation.

"What can you think of me—after all I said! I could kill myself!"

"Now, I wouldn't do that, ma'am," was Ben's sage counsel. "And my thoughts toward you are sure mighty warm at present." Then he added to himself: "Gee, she is not much more than a kid."

Unconsciously he voiced the thought more audibly than was prudent. The girl stiffened with an air of injured dignity.

"Indeed," she protested. "I'm nineteen; nearly nineteen, that is."

Young Mr. Fowler, from the lofty eminence of his own two and twenty years, smiled indulgently.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I can see I was wrong. But the question now is, what are we going to do?"

"They must have taken you for Bert!" she exclaimed.

Ben Fowler bowed gravely.

"That's exactly what I judged to be the case, ma'am." Then more seriously he went on: "And I've judged out a few other details. Mr. Hastings of the Boxed Triangle is your dad, ain't he?"

She nodded.

"You met this Bert French outside somewhere and have been seeing him without your dad's knowing it. Chet Randall was also interested in you, though you didn't care especially for him. He was the party your dad hoped you'd marry. Excuse me, ma'am, for being so personal in my remarks—but ain't it the truth?"

"How do you know all that?" the girl cried, her consternation proving the accuracy of Ben's deductions.

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"It's not so hard to figure out, ma'am. Randall pulls his gun on French on sight. You and he are the only folks on the ranch that know French. Only natural that you're the occasion for that gun pulling. Also, your dad thought a lot of his foreman, and if he hadn't been inclined to favor him for son-in-law, you wouldn't have been so secret about meeting the other man. Probably you and Randall were somewhere together when Bert French hopped into the game."

"It was at a dance," she confessed in a faint voice. "You'd make a tremendous success at fortune telling."

Miss Hastings managed a feeble smile as she said this.

"Would you like for me to go on further, ma'am?" Ben demanded boldly; whereupon she nodded in frank curiosity.

"If you think I can stand it," was her whisper.

Ben Fowler made a few mysterious passes through the air.

"Past and future lie before me," said he, throwing into his voice the breathless intonation of a professional soothsayer. "Your trail has just been crossed by a light-complected stranger. He is a young man of good character, though over him hangs the shadow of a crime. Fear not. He is innocent. I can see your trail and his tangled together like threads, crossing each other again and again. At last they go on together—as one."

He made a few more movements with his hands, and concluded by passing one across his face, as if bewildered, coming from a trance. When next Ben spoke it was in his own natural voice.

"Whatever did I go and say, ma'am?" he drawled. "You'll have to excuse me, but when I go off like that I don't remember."

"It's just as well, I imagine," she assured him primly, though a smile lurked about the corners of her mouth.

"You don't know much about French, do you, ma'am?" Ben Fowler inquired. "Where he comes from, who he is, and all that?"

Miss Hastings gazed away in some embarrassment.

"Why—no," was the unwilling confession. "Somebody introduced us at that dance—I've forgotten who it was. But Mr. French seemed very nice—and—I'd had a little squabble with Chet. He was taking too many things for granted, and a devil seemed to possess me that night. I wanted to make him suffer—to make him wildly jealous—

"That was the way it started, but soon I found I was liking Mr. French. I mean I *thought* I was liking him—and he seemed to like me, too. Chet was splendid about it all, better than I deserved. He never told dad a word, and now he's d-dead." She choked down a sob. "I l-liked Chet awfully well, too, only not the way he wanted me to."

She paused to dab at her eyes with a bit of a handkerchief; then went on speaking, once more in control of her feelings.

"Bert French never told me about himself, so you see I don't know as much as I ought to, considering how intimate we became. Do you think I've been terribly wicked?" she asked appealingly; whereupon a warm glow suffused Ben Fowler's being. He felt supremely gratified to see how desirous this attractive young girl was to clear herself in his eyes.

"Why, no, ma'am. It wasn't wicked—not at all. Just kind of foolish like, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she agreed soberly, "it was very foolish, and I'm sorry."

"I'm not, ma'am. Because otherwise I'd never have had the luck of meeting you, which I'm counting the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. And luck's never slighted me in the past, either," he added.

She smiled in appreciation of Ben's rather haltingly expressed compliment.

"Now, coming down to present cases," young Mr. Fowler resumed, "will folks at the Boxed Triangle be likely to discover who it was that turned me loose?"

"I'm afraid so," she whispered. "I stole the extra key from dad's room while he was asleep. No one else knows where he kept it."

"What's likely to happen when he finds out? I mean, will he be mad at you?"

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She shuddered involuntarily.

"He will—if he once finds out why I did it." Her distress was increasingly apparent. "I don't know what I'll do. I can't bear to think of poor dad's finding out—" She shuddered again. "I've never deceived him like this before. He'll feel terrible."

"I tell you what," Ben suddenly proposed. "We'll hustle back and you can lock me up in the same place. Then nobody 'll ever be wise to this little ride we've had."

"But what about you? Don't you know what—?"

Ben Fowler shrugged his shoulders in superb indifference.

"That's not the point, Miss Hastings, ma'am," said he stoutly. "What we got to consider now is you. Nothing else counts. And whatever might develop, I want you to keep still about what you did to-night. Never mind me."

She hesitated a moment, her resolution wavering.

"You'd risk death—an awful death—for me?" she demanded incredulously.

"Why, I'd risk anything in the world for you, ma'am," was Ben's simple answer.

He seemed surprised that she should ever question so obvious a fact.

"I wouldn't let you."

"Yes, you would—for your dad's sake. I know they was nothing wrong about your meeting Frenchy on the quiet the way you did—I can read that in your eyes, ma'am—but we can't risk hurting your dad. Dads sometimes have funny notions about their pretty little girls. You see what I'm driving at, ma'am?"

"Yes—I see," she murmured.

"Then it's all settled."

"But they must have discovered your escape by now," she faltered. "We've been gone nearly an hour."

"That's a chance we got to take. And the sooner we get back, the better our chances are to put it across. Come on, Miss Hastings; let's see how fast these nags can throw their feet."

Without giving heed to the girl's protests, Ben seized her mount by the bridle rein, sending the animals swiftly back over the miles between them and the Boxed Triangle.

"Get the saddles off these hosses," Ben whispered to his companion, "just as soon as you've snapped the door shut on me. Come along, Miss Hastings," and he ran toward the outhouse that was his former jail, the door of which was swinging ajar as they had left it.

Even then a sudden commotion broke out at the main ranch house.

"Somebody's made a discovery and is giving an alarm," Ben told her. "Let the play run, ma'am. We'll give 'em a bit to think over. Work fast."

A soft little hand grasped Ben's as they entered the dark log building.

"Don't call me ma'am any more," she murmured. "My name is Judith. I won't forget what you've done for me," and then two warm lips brushed his cheeks. "Good-by—Ben!" and she was gone, the heavy door swinging shut, followed by the snap of the padlock.

Young Mr. Fowler grinned delightedly as he stretched out on his cot in feigned slumber.

"I got my kiss, after all, I did," he muttered. "Old-timer, you've met the future Mrs. Fowler; and, boy, I'm saying she's a wonder. Judith—now I claim that's a right pretty name."

The sound of running footsteps came to his ears; confused shouts rapidly approaching the makeshift prison. They suddenly stopped outside.

"Judas Priest!" a voice cried in startled surprise. "Why—the damned door's shut and locked!"

"Open it up!" some one cried.

A moment later the door was jerked back, several men crowding inside. A match flared, and Ben Fowler half rose from his cot, yawning.

"What the merry hell's the matter?" he grumbled. "Seems like you ought to let a fellow sleep, especially when you're not counting on giving him many more chances."

Bradford Hastings thrust himself forward amid the flare of other matches and muttered ejaculations.

"You, Pete Rawlins!" he snapped.

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"What's the idea of getting the whole ranch out of bed on a false alarm like this? You must be drunk or crazy!"

A young puncher passed a bandanna across his sweating face with an air of utter bewilderment that was ridiculous in the extreme. His entire cosmos appeared to have gone most decidedly blooie.

"Good Lord, Mr. Hastings!" he muttered. "There's something awful fishy about all this. Two minutes ago or mebby a little longer, I happened to come by the shack, and the door stood wide open. I rushed inside, and as sure as I'm alive the place was empty. As empty as—"

"Wasn't as empty as your head, Pete," one of his fellows jeeringly assured him. "Couldn't have been that empty."

"That private bottle of yours must be terrible stuff," put in another; while a third added dryly:

"Only thing your head's good for is to keep your ears from crowding each other."

Almost frightened, Rawlins glared from one to another of his tormenters.

"Before God, Mr. Hastings, it's the truth!" he cried earnestly. "I did come into this place and it was empty!" Fearfully he appealed to Ben Fowler; "Weren't you out of here a few minutes ago?"

Young Mr. Fowler laughed mirthlessly.

"Talk sense, hombre!" was his advice. "If I ever got out of this mess I'm in do you figure I'd come back again? Wouldn't I be fanning it for the tall timber as fast as any cayuse I could get hold of could shake his laigs?"

Blank consternation o'erspread the young cow-puncher's face. His uneasy glance flickered here and there, a peculiar, feverish glint in his eyes. He was becoming convinced in spite of himself.

"Guess I'm going plumb loco," he muttered.

"You ain't a going, Pete," one of his fellows heartlessly informed him. "You're gone a'ready. It's sure bad medicine when a chap starts seeing things at night; especially things that ain't there."

Bradford Hastings alone took pity on his rider's distress.

"Might be you made a mistake, Pete," said he, not unkindly. "Got into one of the other sheds, and thought it was the one where we'd locked this bird."

But Pete Rawlins only shook his head.

"It was this one, Mr. Hastings," he persisted. "I come in and lit a match. Guess I'd know it from any of the others."

Which remark brought forth a renewed outburst of ridicule and mocking advice. Then the party left, while Ben Fowler heaved a sigh of relief.

"I was sure afraid they'd take a notion to look me over," he grunted. He had been careful to hold his hands behind him, as though still bound. "If they'd noticed my fists were loose, things would be different a heap. And mebby I haven't got that young Pete puncher guessing. He thinks his brains and eyes have both gone sour on him.

"When they come in the morning I'll tell 'em that I sawed the rope apart on the edge of the iron cot. That could be done. Wonder what become of the rope anyway? I ought to fray out the ends so it won't show a clean cut like a knife would make."

He pawed around on the floor, but was unable to locate the missing rope. Yet young Mr. Fowler's splendid optimism refused to be dampened.

"I'll get it all right, as soon as things are lighted up," he told himself confidently. "Ain't it wonderful to meet a girl like that!" and he dreamily lounged back on the cot, adding: "Even if her dad is planning to swing me off. I wish I could have seen her a little plainer. If she's that pretty when it's almost dark, I don't dast think how beautiful she'd be by daylight. And she kissed me too, she did!"

So young Mr. Fowler's thoughts rambled blissfully on. You never would have imagined for an instant that morning might bring a certain unpleasantness—involving such trifles as a rope around a chap's neck, together with the limb of a cottonwood tree.

Yet he would doubtless have felt less content with the way things were going had he been privileged to overhear a conversation at the ranch house. Pete Rawlins had followed his employer instead of returning

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with the other riders. Hastings noticed this, facing him impatiently.

"Well, what is it?" he growled.

"I just wanted to prove that something funny is going on hereabouts, Mr. Hastings," Pete said quietly.

"Never mind! Go to sleep and forget it. We all make mistakes sometimes," and Hastings indifferently started to enter the house. "You don't have to square yourself with me," he threw back over his shoulder.

"Just a minute! Ain't this the rope you tied that fellow's hands with?" and the rider held out two or three short pieces of stout cord. "Been cut with a knife. I picked 'em up on the floor by the cot as the crowd was leaving."

Hastings's attention was now fully centered on what his cow-puncher said. Eagerly he scrutinized the fragments of rope held out for inspection.

"This is what I used all right," he conceded.

"I figured it might be just as well to let the rest of the outfit trail along with the notion in their heads that I was wrong," the cowboy added significantly. "At first they really had me going. I even got to thinking I was cockeyed; that I never saw the open door and the room empty—when all the time I knew I'd seen them same things.

"It's like I said before, Mr. Hastings. Something fishy's stirring when a lad accused of murder and pretty sure to be hung for it is jumping back and forth like a jack-in-the-box."

"You're all right, Pete. And you showed damned good judgment in keeping this under your lid when most fellows would have to spring the facts. I appreciate it. Now we'll just let things ride as they are for a while longer."

"That's what I was aiming to do, Mr. Hastings," and the cowboy departed to join his fellows. His reappearance at the bunkhouse was signal for a barrage of good-natured joshing, all of which Pete took—and returned with interest.

Meanwhile Hastings hurried to his sleeping quarters, his first act being to look for the extra key to the temporary jail. He found that useful little article in its customary place. It told no tales.

"Humph!" grunted Hastings to himself. Then he thoughtfully went back to bed.

CHAPTER III.

RUSTLERS' ROOST.

THE sun of early morning shot its slanting beams down upon a small park, hidden away in a rough stretch of tumbled mountain country. In the center of this park, half concealed from casual view by a cluster of massive pines, stood a substantial log cabin.

In appearance the structure was not especially striking save for one feature, which could not fail to attract the eye of any thoughtful beholder. The place seemed constructed with the sole idea of defense. Walls were thick enough to stop anything short of a bullet from the most powerful of rifles; windows were few and all very narrow, located six feet or more above the ground level; on each of the four sides an occasional loop-hole afforded the occupants an excellent chance to fire on an attacking force with a minimum of danger to themselves.

A small spring bubbled out near one of the trees. In case of a siege the defenders were thus assured an abundant supply of water, readily to be obtained under cover of darkness.

Adjoining the building at the rear was a low wing which served as a stable for horses, and so constructed as not in any way to interfere with an efficient defense.

A man lounged in the doorway of this small fortress, lazily looking out on the scene before him—a scene whose wild, rugged beauty the brush of a master might well have transferred to canvas. Yet the spectator remained cold to the splendid glory of the mountain sunrise, deriving instead merely a stolid sort of enjoyment from the cigarette held loosely between his thin, cruel lips.

Presently he stepped from the shelter of the building, gazing down the rocky trail with quickened interest. A mounted man appeared, trotting briskly forward.

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"Hey, you fellows! Conway's back."

At this summons three men hurried from the cabin, joining their companion who silently awaited the rider's approach.

"What luck?" one of them called, as the newcomer came within hailing distance.

"O. K.," was the retort. "Everything's slick as grease. Gosh, but I'm hungry! Anything to eat around?"

"Grouse frying in the pan," he was told. "Cakes on the side. Coffee's hot, too. You blew along just in time, Conway."

"Sounds good to me," and Conway swung from his horse, pausing to remove saddle and bridle. "I'll give you the dope while we eat."

The five thereupon adjourned to the cabin, where they were quickly occupied with the important matter of breakfast.

"I located your chap down at Apache Cañon where the irrigation dam is going through," Conway said, his mouth full of fried grouse. He spoke particularly to the man who seemed to be recognized by the others as leader. "He's got the contract to supply dressed beef for the construction gang at twenty dollars per carcass. He's willing to pay us fifteen—and no questions asked."

"That ain't so bad," one of the group conceded. "What you think of it, Frenchy?" This last spoken to the same man Conway had addressed.

"How many beeves a week can he use?" the latter inquired, by way of answer.

"Thirty."

"That's four hundred and a half—split six ways, because of course Lon Terrill's in on it. Seventy-five dollars to each of us. And the man at Apache Cañon drags down a hundred fifty for his share. It don't seem to me like a fair split."

"But he takes most of the risk," spoke up a hitherto silent member of the company. "So he probably figures on being entitled to more."

"Like hell he takes most of the risk!" Conway exploded. "You're crazy. I ain't kicking especially about the split, which seems fair enough everything considered, but don't get off any wise cracks about the risk. Where we going to get the steers to fill orders with, huh?"

"Why, old man Hastings of the Boxed Triangle is scheduled to contribute, ain't he? I thought that was understood."

"Sure, it's understood. But don't get the quaint notion in your head that Brad Hastings is going to say to us real polite like, 'Help yourselves, gents. I got plenty steers. Take all you want!' Risk? Say, after we rush off the first hundred or so head of Boxed Triangle stock, there's going to be particular hell booming over that way. Mebby you ain't acquainted with Brad Hastings. I am! Didn't I ride for his outfit six months?"

"All right! All right!" mumbled the previous speaker. "Have it your own way. What'll we do, Bert? Tell that middle man he's got to raise the ante a dollar or two?"

"He won't pay it," Conway said decisively. "A lad on the spot offered to sell him slow elk from a local range for thirteen a head, but he's a trifle leery of that. Afraid things might get stirred up, and spoil his graft. He'd rather do business with us, being's we're more'n a hundred miles away—but fifteen's his top price. Strikes me as reasonable. Seventy-five a week's a damned sight better than forty a month and found."

"That's true as far as it goes, Conway," Bert French assured him, "but you want to consider the overhead," and he made a significant circle about his throat with one hand.

"Course it's got to be handled careful, but I've done some investigating, and see how it can be swung pretty smooth. We run off say a hundred and twenty-five steers. That'll keep us going for a month. They's a place within a dozen miles of the dam where we could keep the dogies—and nobody'd find 'em in a year. Just made for our needs. Good grass and water, right handy. We deliver the thirty dressed beeves, collect our money, and fade out of the picture till a week later, when we repeat. All we got to do is lie low and have the meat ready on market day.

"When the four weeks are up, Hastings and his riders will likely be getting over the shock of the first raid, and are some careless. So we hop off with another in-

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stallment. That way there's less hard work and less risk." He paused expectantly.

"I don't see any objections to the scheme as Conway's outlined it, Bert," spoke up a man who was manipulating the frying pan. "Let's go through according to schedule."

"Anybody got a kick to register?" French asked. And none was forthcoming.

"All right, then, Conway. You can start back for Apache Cañon this afternoon and complete the final arrangements."

"That ain't hardly necessary," Conway said coolly.

"What do you mean?" French snapped, a harsh note creeping into his voice.

"Why, all the arrangements are made. I told the chap that we'd accept his terms—and make first delivery come Saturday."

"What the hell right you got to close up matters that way?" was French's heated inquiry. "Who's running this lay-out—you or me?"

"Why, you're the boss, Bert, but they ain't no call to throw a fit. I only acted for the interests of all concerned."

"When I send a man to do something, I want him to obey orders," French rasped. "You are told to get the dope and make a report; not to wind the thing up tight."

Conway's brow clouded in resentment at his chief's criticism.

"All right; and now you just listen to this bit of information, French. I don't have to take any rough language from you and I don't aim to. Get me?"

"Cool off, Bert," one of the gang hastily advised, playing the rôle of peacemaker. "Why not hear all Conway's got to say before reaching conclusions. Likely he ain't told us the whole story yet."

French controlled his temper with an effort.

"You got the floor, Conway," he said.

Conway's scowl slowly faded from his face.

"That's better," he grumbled. "They *is* more to the yarn. We had to take it or leave it right away, as my party wanted a definite answer on the spot—yes or no. I already mentioned to you that he had other irons in the fire. So naturally I told him yes. And if you don't like it," the speaker added defiantly, "you're welcome to lump it. Hell! Instead of this crabbing I ought to get a vote of thanks. That's the way I look at it."

French extended his hand, handsomely yielding the issue.

"You did exactly right, Conway. I'm sorry I blew up."

"That's all jake then, Bert. I ain't nursing any grudges." Thus the dove's wings fluttered softly above the aggregation.

"Anything new break while I was gone?" Conway presently asked.

"Bert shot up that foreman of Brad's," he was told, with a chuckle, "and they're putting the job on a stray wrangler that happened along, Bert having swapped cayuses with him while the lad was down Plum Cañon getting a drink. Ain't that a joke? Nobody over at the Boxed Triangle knows he ain't Bert, now Chet's gone, except the Hastings girl. Being's she's sweet on Bert, it ain't likely she'll squeal."

"No," French added complacently. "Judie'll keep her pretty little lips clamped tight. She can't well afford to do anything else."

Talk next swung to details of the first raid on Boxed Triangle stock.

"Here's what I suggest," French said crisply, "as the best way of carrying through Conway's plan. Hastings has somewhere close to a hundred and fifty steers thrown on that section of range between Plum Cañon and Castle Butte. We'll run those off to-night, shoving the beggars as far as we can before daybreak. If we're lucky they may not be missed for quite some time. We'll hit through the southeast part of Sand Flats on the way to kill the trail in case Hastings finds out and gets a crowd after us. I'll stay with you fellows as far as the Flats, and from then on Conway's in charge."

"You ain't going the full route with us, Bert?" some one asked in surprise.

"Not this time, boys," French responded, with a meaning grin. I've got a few little matters in this neck of the woods that need attention."

"It ain't hard to figure out what them little matters are," one of French's followers chortled. "Well, she's a good looking

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number, Bert, and we wish you joy of her. Ain't that correct, fellers?" and he winked at the rest.

"Give her our regards, Bert," Conway said jovially. "Luck to each and every one of us—in love, war, and business!" and he went through the motions of tossing off a drink.

CHAPTER IV.

ONE OR TWO SURPRISES.

THE morning after young Mr. Fowler's astonishing adventures of the night before found that gentleman receiving an early visitor in the person of Bradford Hastings himself, who gazed upon his prisoner with an enigmatic smile.

"Have a good night?" Hastings inquired blandly.

"So, so," Ben rejoined, his face expressionless. Inside his thoughts were whirling along tumultuously. "Old Timer, there stands your future daddy-in-law. Play the cards careful—plumb close to your chest. He's a chap you don't want to rile."

He still sprawled on the cot, hands behind him. Ben was vaguely worried over the mysterious disappearance of the rope; he had ransacked the room for it, and with no success. *Where had it gone to?*

"Now, *Mr. French,*" Hastings began pointedly, "there are a few questions I'd like to ask you."

"Excuse me," was Ben's murmured apology. "Might as well be accurate. Name's Fowler."

"One name's as good as another. Suppose I think of you as French."

Ben shrugged his shoulders indifferently, as though resigning himself to the foibles of his host.

"Smoke?" and without warning Hastings held out a cigar.

Ben smiled craftily; then went through a series of violent and complicated contortions, ending by triumphantly jerking his hands into view. Luxurious—he stretched, rubbing his wrists where imaginary bands had chafed them.

"Beats all what a chap can do for a whiff of tobacco," he naïvely remarked. "When I saw that weed, all of a sudden I got so strong I yanked my fists plumb through the rope you tied on 'em."

"I saw you do it," Hastings commented dryly. "You've sure earned your smoke, son. Here it is. Light up."

Ben accepted the gift gratefully, bit the end off, and took an experimental draw or two; then paused to regard the cigar with deep interest, as some rare museum exhibit. The ranchman himself selected one, and the two puffed away, covertly eying each other under the smoke screen.

Hastings was the first to break the silence.

"When we picked you up," said he, "I was convinced we had the man who shot Chet Randall; convinced that you were Bert French. It was quite a strain not to swing you on the spot. I still *think* you're French, while admitting I'm not so certain as I was. Now I'm willing to argue the matter, which was not the case twelve hours or so ago. What proof have you to offer the court that you're not Bert French?"

Ben appreciatively exhaled a cloud of fragrant smoke; it was truly an excellent cigar, an uncommon object to meet in the range country.

"What proof you got that I am?" he countered.

"That's dodging the issue, son."

"Well," defensively, "I heard somewheres that a man ought to be counted innocent until he's proved guilty. Ain't it up to you?"

"If I empaneled a jury from Boxed Triangle riders and put the case up to them," Hastings said, a grim smile on his lips, "they'd hang you in less than ten minutes."

"Me and my lawyer wouldn't accept your jury," Ben grinned cheerfully. "Them riders of yours are too blamed prejudiced."

"True enough. But we're drifting. What arguments have you to show why we shouldn't string you up for Chet's killing?"

"Why, the best argument in the world!" young Mr. Fowler cried enthusiastically. "I ain't the guy that killed him."

"Testimony of that sort ruled out by the court. Prejudiced. Let's see now.

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What outfit did you say you worked for last?"

"I didn't happen to say. But it was the Flying Z, ranging north of Eagle Pass—Telescope Hills."

"Old Colonel Arlington owns that outfit, don't he?" Hastings asked innocently.

"No, sir; Arlington's brand is the Bar Circle Bar. Harv Haslewood owns the Flying Z. Guess you're a mite twisted, sort of, Mr. Hastings."

"Hm! Perhaps I was. Harv bought the place ten or twelve years ago, didn't he—from—"

"From Jim McKenzie. He's a brother of Judge McKenzie."

"What's the judge's brand?"

"The Star Dot."

"Sure enough—The Star Dot. The Kelsey Brothers run an outfit on that same range, don't they?"

"No, sir; they don't. I never heard of any Kelsey Brothers having an outfit up that way."

"Just as well, mebby. Hm! You seem well posted on that region, son."

"Be a darned fool to claim I come from a country I didn't know, wouldn't I?" Ben retorted with engaging frankness.

"But it's some distance from here," Hastings reminded him. "I can't spare a rider to go 'way up there and bring some one back to identify you."

Ben remained silent, smoking.

"Funny sort of proposition that nobody on my place knows exactly what French looks like. He's acquainted over Painted Rocks way. Probably I could send after somebody to help us out."

"I said a while back that it was up to you to do the proving," Ben said between puffs. "Me—I ain't able to do much myself. These solid walls sort of cramp a fellow's style."

For a moment both gave attention to their cigars.

"Do you know," Hastings presently remarked, "I rather like you, son. I'm beginning to hope you're not French after all."

Young Mr. Fowler beamed like the sun on a clear day.

"That helps a lot," he returned, grinning to himself at the double meaning under his innocent sounding words.

Shortly afterwards Hastings left, sending for Pete Rawlins.

"About this wrangler, Pete," said he, "I feel up in the air. He insists he's not French, but of course is in no shape to prove it. I can't very well hang him under the circumstances, and I can't let him go. I quizzed him about the section he claims to be from, which I happen to be acquainted with, and he knows it like a book. Still that proves nothing; French himself might easily have spent a summer up there.

"Now here's what was in my mind. There ought to be somebody around Painted Rocks that knows French pretty well. I want you to ride over there and bring back any such party you may find. Keep your mouth shut as to details. You can offer him reasonable payment for his services. Get me, Pete? You showed last night that your head is something more than an ornament—and that's why I'm picking you out from the rest of the outfit."

"I gotcha, Mr. Hastings."

"It's a hard ride to Painted Rocks, but I want you to make it as snappy as you can. You ought to get back here to-morrow evening, I should say, barring unforeseen accidents."

"They won't be no unforeseen accidents, Mr. Hastings," Pete rejoined confidently. "I'm on my way."

Things moved along quietly at the Boxed Triangle during the next thirty-six hours. Ben Fowler was kept a close prisoner, and now a guard was posted at the door, for Bradford Hastings had no mind that whatever events might have happened the preceding night should be repeated.

Naturally Judith Hastings kept away from the out-house, which did not disturb Ben in the least. Once, when the door of his prison was opened for a brief space of time, he caught a distant glimpse of the girl—whereupon the heart of young Mr. Fowler went thump—thump—thump.

Pete Rawlins was back an hour before the expected time, a stranger with him, whom Pete conducted directly into his employer's presence. The cattleman shot a keen glance at the newcomer. To Rawlins

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he whispered, "Go and get that chap from our hoosegow. Bring him in here and spring him on this fellow without any warning."

Pete nodded understandingly and hurried away.

"What I want of you," Hastings said to his guest, "is a simple matter which my rider may have briefly explained."

The stranger twisted himself a cigarette, his face registering the blankness of a professional poker player. While waiting for Rawlins to return Hastings chatted amiably along with odds and ends of range country gossip, though no reference was made to the recent Boxed Triangle tragedy.

Steps sounded in a hallway outside the room; the door was abruptly opened and Ben Fowler, with Rawlins at his heels, appeared at the entrance. Fowler glanced inquiringly at Hastings—he had not been told why he was wanted—but the cattleman's eyes were directed towards the stranger. Recognition flashed on the latter's face.

"Why, hello, Bert!" he cried genially. "What the hell you doing here?"

Ben Fowler never turned a hair; outwardly, that is. But black rage swelled up in his heart.

Through narrowed eyes he looked to see how Hastings was taking it. The ranchman, himself no mean poker player, betrayed little. Ben could not miss, however, a certain hardness about the features; that same grim, set expression with which Hastings had greeted him at the trail fork, the afternoon of his capture.

"I might have expected this would happen," was the thought in Ben's mind. "But shucks! Hastings don't need to fall for the play. At that I don't know's I blame him."

Consternation flooded the stranger's face as he glanced from one to the other of the two men before him.

"Good gosh, Bert!" he exclaimed regretfully. "Guess I've bungled things for fair!" Heatedly he turned to Hastings. "This is a hell of a note," he grunted. "Steering me on to throw down a pal. What you got on Bert French anyway?"

Really the fellow carried his rôle very well, not making the mistake of overdoing it. Even Ben felt a grudging admiration at the cool effrontery that was displayed.

Yet he was conscious of a vague disappointment that Hastings was so easily deceived.

"I'll say this much, Mr. Hastings," said Ben. "I never laid eyes on this shorthorn before, and if I ever get a chance to roll a gun on the pole-cat I'll gurantee he's missing at next grub pile."

The stranger shook his head sorrowfully.

"I don't blame you for being mad, Bert. I'd sure feel the same way myself in your shoes."

"What's your name?" Hastings put in.

"Lon Terrill."

"Where'd did you get him, Pete?"

"Zack Thayer steered me to him," Rawlins responded. "Said this fellow knew French."

"Thayer vouch for him?"

Rawlins hesitated before replying.

"Well, not exactly that, Mr. Hastings. Course I didn't tell him what you wanted. But he sort of implied that the fellow was O. K."

"Zack's pretty reliable," Hastings mused. Then to Terrill: "What do I owe you for your time?"

"Ten dollars was the price."

"Here you are," and Hastings flipped him a half eagle. "I don't need you any more."

"I'm sorry as hell, Bert," Terrill muttered. At the same time there was a faint stir in the next room, but no one seemed to notice it. He left closing the door behind him.

The hall through which Terrill had to pass was quite dusky as it was already beginning to grow dark outside. Chuckling to himself the man moved leisurely onwards.

Suddenly a brown little hand reached out from the open door of a room, seizing the butt of the pistol swinging at his hip. One swift pull drew the weapon, a click sounding as the hammer snapped back into full cock.

Startled, Terrill whirled on his heels. Light in the hall was not too dim for him to perceive himself covered by his own gun,

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held in the hand of a slim girl who faced him with blazing eyes.

"Oh, how I hate a liar!" came tensely from her lips. "For half a cent I'd shoot you dead!"

CHAPTER V.

"THE BEST LAID PLANS—"

MR. LON TERRILL was for the moment completely flabbergasted; the whole thing had come upon him with such amazing swiftness. He was complacently congratulating himself on a very decent piece of work—and now this earthquake; this deluge—and out of a clear sky.

"Why, what's the matter, Miss Hastings?" he mumbled, stalling for time to rally his scattered faculties.

"You know what's the matter;" her voice, discreetly lowered, snapped viciously. "Telling dad that boy in there is Bert French!"

Mr. Terrill floundered, finding himself plunged yet deeper in the morass of misunderstanding.

Assuming, as he did, that Judith Hastings was madly in love with Bert French, why should she be so perturbed that her lover was in a fair way to escape responsibility for the crime he had committed? Terrill shrewdly sized up the girl before him, as best he could in the dusky twilight of the narrow hall.

Terrill was not particularly dumb, and now a swift inspiration came to him, something that completely changed the complexion of the affair.

"She's off Bert," he reasoned, "for some reason or other. And what's more she's flopped for this damned range rider. Ain't women the limit? I got to get out of here on the jump. First thing she'll get up her nerve to spill the story to her dad—and then—good night!"

Judith's flashing eyes bored relentlessly into him; Terrill had an uncomfortable feeling that she was reading his thoughts. He poised on the balls of his feet, tense for a spring.

"Don't do it!" Judith coldly advised him "Last week I shot a rattlesnake out on the range. I could shoot you now with as little regret."

Terrill let his body relax, baffled by the dauntless determination the girl displayed.

"She ain't bluffing," was his thought. "This here's a kind of sure-nuff mess."

The thought of riding over to the Boxed Triangle to condemn a stray wrangler as actual murderer of Chet Randall had at first seemed like the best sort of joke. In fact French had planned things to turn out in some such way, though he had not gone so far as anticipating that Hastings would send a messenger to Painted Rocks.

The original scheme had been for Terrill to ride casually up to the Boxed Triangle inquiring if French had been seen, whereupon opportunity would surely be offered for him to identify the luckless stranger. It was a safe assumption that the latter would immediately become the victim of an impromptu neck-tie party.

The unforeseen action of Bradford Hastings had promised to make the carrying out of the plan all the easier, and Lon Terrill had embarked on it with whole-souled enthusiasm. Now, however, the joke had developed a most disconcerting backfire.

He realized that Judith was doubtless unwilling to let her father know of the intimacy between French and herself; yet he also realized that she would probably do this if the issue were forced. Certainly she would not allow her father to hang the attractive young cowboy thus enmeshed in the web of circumstance.

Lon Terrill perspired slightly, cordially wishing himself elsewhere.

"Where's Bert French?" Judith whispered.

"I don't know, ma'am," Lon lied, casting an uneasy glance over his shoulder, having no desire for Hastings to discover the startling tableau of which he was an unwilling part. The sound of voices still came faintly from the office.

Judith knit her brows in puzzled reflection. Suddenly she seemed to make up her mind.

"Follow me," she said in a low tone, "and don't try any funny business."

"No, ma'am," replied Lon Terrill meek-

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ly. "I'll hop her as soon as she turns her back on me," he reflected. "Knock the gun out of her fist and make a swift break for my cayuse. Lucky the saddle's still on him."

Then he swore softly—under his breath, for instead of turning Judith *backed* down the passage, the muzzle of the big Colt never wavering from Terrill's shrinking form.

"Wish I hadn't filed that trigger catch," he mumbled to himself unhappily. Next in a husky whisper to his fair young captor: "A hair will turn that gun loose, Miss Hastings. I'm expressing the fervent hope that your finger rests lightly on the trigger."

Judith's grim smile, faintly seen in the dusk, was not reassuring.

"This gun won't go off," she said succinctly, "as long as you behave. One false move—and it barks. I always did like a hair-trigger gun."

"I'll be good, ma'am," Lon Terrill assured her; and this time he meant it with all his crafty heart. "I've heard 'em say that Brad Hastings was a hard nut to buck," he told himself, overcome by gloom, "and I'd say it sure seems to run in the family. Thank Gawd he ain't got no boys! Or any more girls, either," came as a final afterthought.

It was not quite dark as Judith and her thoroughly cowed prisoner slipped from the ranch house. The girl shot a searching glance about her. No one was in sight in any direction.

"This way!" she curtly ordered, and motioned Lon to go before her, the muzzle of that gentleman's hair-trigger Colt jabbed forcibly into the hollow of his back.

"What's the plot, ma'am?" Lon muttered. His uneasiness was not diminishing.

"Your part of it is to keep still." Judith's voice was savage. "You've done too much talking already to-night—for a man that hopes to attain a ripe old age. You're a bad insurance risk just now, Mr. Lon Terrill."

Under the potent threat of that cocked gun, Terrill was urged toward one of several scattered outbuildings, similar in construction to that which had recently served Ben Fowler as temporary quarters.

"You can sleep in here to-night," Judith said, opening the door and waving her unwilling guest inside with a jerk of the Colt. Lon hesitated just the fraction of a second, but a glance at Judith's face satisfied him.

"She'd shoot me down like a dawg," was his morose thought. "Ain't it hell to be buffaloed by a girl I could twist around my little finger!"

Then the door swung shut. Judith didn't have a padlock, but the hasp could be secured by a heavy spike, which, from the viewpoint of one on the inside, was fully as effective as any lock.

"If you know what's for your best interests," she called softly to the prisoner, "you'll be quiet. I'm beginning to have a few suspicions about you, hombre." Then Judith left.

After Lon Terrill's departure from the office, Hastings remained silent for the space of a few seconds quietly regarding Ben Fowler.

"It looks bad for you, son," he said at length.

"Yes, it does," young Mr. Fowler agreed brightly. "That's a fact. I mean it does if a party believes that son-of-a-gun. You want to know what I think, Mr. Hastings?"

"What's on your mind, son?" Hastings grunted noncommittally.

"Why, I'm inclined to the opinion that he's a damned liar." Ben paused to twist a cigarette. "Course I may be wrong," he added, as if his one desire was to be fair and impartial to all concerned in the unfortunate affair. "But that's how it impresses me."

"Why would this Terrill want to make us think you were French?"

"Cinch! If he's a friend of Bert French, likely he's already heard about the killing of your foreman and how Frenchy swapped cayuses with me. It ain't reasonable to suppose he'd be all cut up over me being hung for Frenchy's gunplay. I figured all the time things might break this way if you sent for somebody, but it was a chance I had to take."

From where Ben stood he had a view through a window of a portion of open space beside the house. Pete Rawlins and Hastings both sat with their backs to this win-

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dow, a fact for which young Mr. Fowler was supremely thankful.

He had just seen a most intriguing sight; indistinctly, to be sure, but he had seen it none the less. A slim girlish figure passed swiftly across his field of vision, and before her, impotent under the compelling argument of a Colt jabbed into the small of his back, stumbled none other than Mr. Lon Terrill himself. The view was extremely gratifying, especially so considering the feelings Ben entertained toward Terrill.

To one possessed of the unerring powers of deduction with which young Mr. Fowler was blessed, it was not hard to grasp something of what had happened.

"Ain't she a wonder?" he asked himself delightedly. "Old Timer, you sure picked a winner! She's a queen!" But his features told the other two men nothing.

His cigarette had gone out; nonchalantly he relighted it.

Abruptly Hastings let his tipped back chair come down on the floor with a bang.

"Pete," he snapped, "I'm a damned fool. I've always prided myself on being a judge of men, and here I've tried to believe this chap was guilty of Chet's murder against my own instincts. I know he's straight as a string. It's Terrill that's crooked. Stop him, before he gets away, Pete. If he's already gone, take two of the boys and round him up. You can catch him easy with fresh mounts, since his cayuse must be pretty well fagged. The ground's soft enough so the tracks ought to tell you which way he went."

Pete Rawlins, like a loyal cowpuncher, showed no surprise.

"I'll get him," and Pete was gone.

Hastings opened the drawer of his desk, taking from it a belt and holster, the latter containing a Colt .45—the famous Frontier model, beloved of all cowpunchers.

"Here's your shooting iron, son," he smiled, passing the outfit over to Ben.

"Why, now, that's mighty fine of you, Mr. Hastings, sir. You dead sure you can trust me?"

"Yes," the cattleman mused, half to himself, "I'm sure I can trust you. I shouldn't have doubted it even at the first."

In keen satisfaction Ben Fowler buckled the belt around his waist, the fingers of his right hand closing with a caressing gesture on the pistol butt. He drew the weapon and examined it. The six empty shells, fired at the time of his capture, were still in the cylinder.

Ben flipped out the useless cartridges, replacing them with fresh ones from his belt.

"No sense packing an empty gun," he remarked to Hastings, who nodded silently.

"I'm sorry for the way we treated you, son," the cattleman said after a time.

"Why, that's all right," Ben cheerily assured him. "No hard feelings a-tall."

"There's just one thing I'd like cleared up," Hastings went on.

"Good night!" thought Ben in sudden panic. "It's a-coming now."

"That first night when you were a—er—guest here," and the rancher's eyes twinkled shrewdly, "you got out of the place where we had you locked up—and then drifted back again. Mebbe you've seen this before." From his desk drawer Hastings took a few pieces of rope, extending them for Ben's examination. "I can smell mystery here."

Ben gravely took the rope.

"Looks like it's been cut with a knife, don't it?"

"Yes," was the other's dry comment. "I should say as much myself. That wasn't what I wanted to know, however. I'm craving some few of the details as to how it was cut—and by whom. Mebbe you can supply 'em. You know what I just said—about trusting you," and the gray eyes of the old cattleman smiled steadily into Ben's blue eyes.

Poor Ben Fowler! He couldn't lie about the rope, now of all times, when the older man had practically put him on his honor. Yet how could he tell the truth? That would involve Judith—more or less seriously.

His face grew haggard under the strain.

"Well, son, speak up," Hastings gently prompted him.

Ben opened his lips; started to say something, yet the words refused to come. Just at that instant the quiet of the ranch yard was rent by a violent outburst.

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"Pete must have located Terrill," Hastings exclaimed, starting to his feet. "Likely he's protesting against the boys detaining him."

Ben suspected that this assumption was not correct, at the same time profoundly grateful that his cross-examination was postponed to a later date.

So the two stood, for ten seconds, listening. Then footsteps came running down the hall to the office.

"Mr. Hastings!" a voice shouted.

"Here I am," the ranchman called. "What's stirring?"

An excited cowpuncher burst into the room.

"Hell's stirring, Mr. Hastings. Rustlers have jumped them steers we threw in on the Castle Butte range last week. Cleaned 'em out; every last dogie. Limpy Reynolds just rode in with the news!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOLF SHOWS ITS TEETH.

"RUSTLERS, eh?" Hastings snapped grimly. "Well, I guess we haven't forgot how to deal with that brand of scum. Where's Limpy?"

"Outside. The boys are throwing leather on their cayuses now. Must be near ready to go."

"That's the kind of an outfit I've got," Hastings grunted to Ben Fowler. "There's not a rider among 'em that wouldn't go through hell and high water for me. I don't often hire the other sort, and when I do they don't stay long. Luke Conway was one. You ever run across him?"

Ben shook his head.

"No loss, son," and Hastings led the way outside, where his riders were assembled.

It was quite dark by now, but the keen eyes of the ranchman missed no detail as they swept the group of mounted men.

"Where's Smith and Tyson?"

"They went off with Pete after that Terrill chap," he was told. "Ain't got back yet."

Ben knew that Rawlins and his companions had departed on a useless quest, since with his own eyes he had seen Judith incarcerate Lon Terrill in one of the outbuildings. He said nothing, however. That was Judith's affair, and he had no intention of interfering with whatever plans that capable young lady might have formed.

She was working for him obviously; that was quite enough for Ben Fowler.

"We won't wait," Hastings declared. "Limpy, how many riders in the gang that ran off our steers?"

"Five, Mr. Hastings, near's I could tell. I kinda wanted to fan off after 'em alone, but it seemed like I'd better report first."

"You did right. Which way did they head?"

"Due north; toward Arrow Notch."

"How much start they got?"

"I'd say they moved the stock out some time last night."

"All right. Let's go!" and Hastings swung to a horse one of his men had saddled for him.

Ben Fowler moved swiftly forward.

"How about me riding with you, Mr. Hastings?" he asked.

"You boys sift along," Hastings ordered. "I'll overtake you." Then in a lower tone to Ben: "Why do you want to go, son?"

"Oh, I'm always keen for anything that promises a little excitement."

"I'd think you had enough for a day or two. But you better stay behind, though I appreciate your offer. Some of my riders still think you're the party that shot Chet Randall, and you riding with us might make things a bit awkward."

"I hadn't thought of it that way, sir," said Ben Fowler slowly, regretfully.

"Don't take it to heart, son," and the ranchman's hand rested on his shoulder in friendly fashion. "Besides it would be a favor to me if you'd be here to tell Rawlins what's broke loose when he gets back. I've got a girl, too. I don't know where she is now—mebbe riding off somewheres—but if you run into her you can pass on the news. She'll likely be surprised to find everybody gone."

Young Mr. Fowler's heart went thump—thump—thump at this pleasing thought, but conscious of Hastings's scrutiny he displayed no particular animation.

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"I'll tell her," said he. "That is if I happen to see the young lady. Any orders for Rawlins?"

"No," and the rancher whirled his mount. "So long, son! See you later."

"Good luck!" Ben called after him.

A delicious thrill shot through young Mr. Fowler as the thudding hoofbeats rapidly disappeared in the gathering darkness. Judith was probably somewhere about the ranch, keeping discreetly hidden after that summary dealing with the man brought by her father's messenger All he had to do was find her.

Ben longed to continue their conversation at the point where it had ceased on their previous meeting; his cheek still burned with the sweet warmth of that kiss.

He began a cautious exploration of the buildings, nowhere finding any sign of the girl, and at last was forced to the unwelcome conclusion that Hastings was correct in the assumption that she had ridden away.

"That's it, of course," he muttered in keen disappointment. "I might have known it. If she was lying low on the place she'd sure have popped out to see what all the excitement was. Wish I knew which way she's gone."

Restlessly Ben wandered about, resentful that he was denied the privilege of taking full advantage of this opportunity to cultivate Judith's further acquaintance. Time dragged on. Finally with a vague idea of perhaps riding forth in search of her, he went down to the corral to see what it offered in the way of horseflesh.

Several mounts were available—saddles as well, on racks in the stable. Ben paused in the act of taking one of them down.

"Shucks!" he mused. "If I go fanning off on a blind trail she might come back and me never know it. Ain't this the rottenest luck!" He rolled a cigarette, and sat on a box smoking discontentedly.

After her exploit in getting Lon Terrill safely out of the way, Judith found herself trembling violently, a prey to the inevitable reaction, badly frightened, almost in a panic at thought of what she had done.

In capturing Terrill she had, womanlike, acted largely on impulse, giving no thought to what might follow. With the deed once accomplished, however, she was possessed with a lively dread of how her father might take it. After this there seemed no hope of keeping from him the knowledge of her secret friendship with French.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed. "What's going to happen to me now?" But none the less she was conscious of no regret, her fists clenching into two tight little balls at recollection of Terrill's duplicity.

The first important thing was to get rid of his horse, so that his continued presence would not immediately be detected. Unobserved by any one, she went swiftly to where the animal was awaiting its owner, tied the reins over the saddlehorn, and started the pony on a brisk gallop into open country by a vigorous slap on its side. So far, so good!

The more Judith pondered the situation, the more strongly she became convinced that home was no place for her during the next few hours. She wanted to get off by herself for a time and think things over.

Furthermore she had learned through experience from early childhood that her indulgent father's sternness at a breach of discipline was never of long duration. He might be quite severe if she were unfortunate enough to be present when he learned of the slip; otherwise the affair rarely amounted to much in his mind.

So Judith, as a little girl, had found it convenient to drop temporarily out of sight as occasion demanded—a habit she had never wholly got over.

So now, in spite of a keen curiosity as to happenings of the near future, the call of the wild sounded loud and clear in her ears. Contrary to usual custom, she departed on foot rather than to saddle a horse.

Darkness on the range held no terrors for this girl of eighteen. She had lived her whole life there, surrounded by vast solitudes; knowing the country and loving it, why should she be afraid? The thought simply didn't exist for Judith Hastings.

"Dad won't do anything so terrible to that nice cow-puncher now," she wisely reasoned. "If he was going to hang him, it would have happened yesterday."

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Judith tramped onward, her thoughts persistently refusing to stray very far from Ben Fowler.

"I think dad likes him, too," she told herself. "Any one could tell by looking at him that Ben's no killer."

A mile or so from the ranch she sat down. Her father usually went to bed fairly early, and Judith's plan was to wait long enough so that she might gain the privacy of her own room without being questioned. Morning would have to take care of itself.

For some time she sat there in silent reverie; at length it seemed that she might safely risk a return. The girl had walked but a short distance when her meditations were interrupted.

"Hello, Judie!"

The voice she recognized as French's, and instantly perceived the man himself on his horse, a dim shape just off the trail she followed.

"Bert!" she gasped in astonishment. "Is this where you are? What are you doing here?"

"Just scouting around," he returned easily. "What are *you* wandering off alone for, Judie?"

"Because I wanted to," she answered rather shortly. Then: "Bert, did you know that dad picked up a puncher for shooting Chet, believing it was you?"

French laughed, spurring his mount up close to her.

"Sure I knew it. That's why I swapped horses with him. Be a good joke if your dad hung the fellow, wouldn't it?"

But Judith was staring at him through the darkness in horrified unbelief. It was the first inkling she had received as to how that mistake in identity came about.

"You swapped horses with him?" she repeated.

"Why not?" French demanded. There was something new in Judith's voice—and something lacking as well. "You'd rather he'd hang some worthless wrangler than hang *me*, wouldn't you, Judie? My cayuse had a little split in the hoof that would leave a plain track in the soft ground; so when that fool cowboy went down to the bottom of Plum Cañon to get him a drink, I took his nag, leaving mine. Clever, wasn't it?"

"It was wicked!" Her voice rang accusingly. "I couldn't blame you so much for the shooting, because Chet was going to kill you. But this horrible plot— Bert, who is Lon Terrill?"

"What do you know about Lon?" His tone was almost savage. Judith, in her turn, was perceiving changes in her former friend.

She remained silent, troubled, struggling with new and sinister suspicions. French studied her as best he could in the darkness. He had been on the point of sounding her out as to why Hastings and a crowd of Boxed Triangle riders had been tearing furiously along another trail, south of the point where he had met Judith. He now saw that she must be ignorant of her father's hurried departure, resolving to profit by that fact.

In all probability no one would be left on duty at the ranch, and French wished to go there; it was a part of the plan he was cherishing. Fate seemed conspiring, through this fortuitous meeting with Judith, to help him carry it along.

"See here, Judie," he told the girl frankly, "I guess I did play a low-down trick on that young chap. Suppose I go back and tell your father I'm the man who shot Chet? I can say that I came to the ranch for something or other; that Chet apparently made a mistake about me and dug for his gun. In self-defense I had to do the same. Your father doesn't need to know about our meeting each other—to-night or any other time. Only in case he doesn't believe me, you might tell about seeing the gun-play."

"You mean that, Bert?" she asked eagerly.

"I wouldn't do it for many folks, Judie," he rejoined. "But I can see how you wouldn't want an outsider to get in trouble on your account—so— Well, what do you say?"

Judith's suspicions were considerably allayed by this unexpected offer. She pondered the notion, seeking weak points.

"How about the horse swapping part?" she objected.

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"Oh, I can clear that up," French said confidently. "The Boxed Triangle posse was hot on my trail—see? I knew they'd string me up in a minute. My plan was merely to let this stranger distract attention from me for a while. How does that sound?"

"It might go," Judith assented.

"I'll make it go, depend on it!" he exclaimed. "And don't worry about—anything. I'll take care of you all along the line, Judie. I think a lot of you, and I guess you know it. Hop up behind, and we'll make tracks."

Judith was still conscious of a faint feeling of mistrust; Bert had been so heartlessly callous in his satisfaction over the cruel joke at Ben Fowler's expense that his abrupt change of front somehow failed to ring true. Yet he seemed to be sincere enough—

"All right," Judith assented, and a moment later was back of the saddle.

To the girl's surprise, the ranch seemed deserted as they approached; no light showed from her father's quarters, nor from the bunk house, where the cowboys usually smoked or played cards for a while before bedtime.

"Why—where is everybody?" she faltered, sliding down from the horse.

It became quickly apparent that the ranch *was* deserted. French, without waiting for an invitation, followed Judith to her father's office, where she lit a lamp.

"They must have gone off in a terrible hurry," was his cool comment. At first he had been disappointed to find that the theft of the cattle had not gone unnoticed a day or two longer; now he was supremely gratified that the discovery came so soon. Everything was fitting perfectly.

"Where can dad have disappeared to?" Judith mused in a puzzled tone. "I saw him in this very room not so very long ago. What do you think of it, Bert?"

"I haven't an idea. But, say, Judie, I ought not to hang around waiting for him. Suppose I write a note. In a day or two I'll drop in again and have a chat. He ought to come through."

"All right, if you wish it that way," Judith agreed.

"Get me a sheet of paper and a pencil or pen, will you?"

Judith did as requested, and for a few minutes French sat at the desk writing busily.

"There!" he exclaimed. "That's done. Care to read it?" and with a peculiar smile French extended the paper toward her.

This is what Judith read, a flush of indignation gradually replacing the tan on her cheeks:

MR. BRADFORD HASTINGS:

Dear Sir—This is to inform you that while I did shoot your foreman, it was done in self-defense. He made a pass for his gun at sight of me, and so I naturally followed the lead. A certain person will testify to the truth of this statement—if necessary.

Since I contemplate becoming a member of your family in the near future, it would be best for all parties concerned if you let the matter drop.

Sincerely yours,
BERT FRENCH.
(Also known as Ben Fowler).

P. S.—Judie sends love. B. F.

"What do you mean by this nonsense, Bert?" Judith demanded angrily. "It isn't true. You promised—"

A hot flame smoldered in French's eyes as he half mockingly surveyed the girl who faced him. He was reflecting, somewhat cynically, that she played the rôle of an offended goddess quite well.

"Gad, Judith," he remarked, "I like you all the more when you get stirred up this way. But coming to the point, it *is* true. I'm asking you to marry me, Judith."

"And I refuse!"

She shook her head defiantly, stamping a small foot determinedly by way of further emphasis.

"So? Well, after our talk to-night I had rather been inclined to anticipate a refusal. Not that it matters so much. My plan was to take you, willingly preferred; but take you just the same. The marriage can come later—as a reward for good behavior."

Through fear-shot eyes she stared at him in horrified silence.

"It's mighty handy for me that your father and his men seem to be away,"

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French went on, unable to resist the temptation to gloat a little. In fact, I imagine they've gone on the trail of rustlers."

Judith grasped the significance of this admission.

"Then you—"

"Hush, my dear!" he interrupted, with a twisted smile. "Loyalty to your future husband should prevent your linking his name with rustling. It doesn't sound nice—even in the family."

Suddenly, before Judith realized that he actually meditated a bodily attack, French was on her with the sure swiftness of a striking rattler. Ruthlessly he forced her arms behind her back, stifling her frightened scream with a hand over her mouth. Judith struggled, but vainly; in less than a minute he had her tied.

"And now, my pretty beauty," said Bert French grimly, "we'll travel. Guess my cayuse will carry double. This note to dad we'll leave close by the lamp, where he can't miss it."

Ben Fowler, down at the stables some distance from the main ranch house, heard no sound to mark the arrival of French and Judith. A few minutes later, however, he did hear something—something that vaguely resembled a girl's scream, at once throttled.

"What was that?" Ben asked himself, waiting tensely for the mysterious noise to be repeated. It didn't come again.

"An owl, mebby," he muttered uneasily. "But seems like it come from up toward the house. Guess I'll go and take a look-see."

When Ben Fowler emerged from the stables he saw a light gleaming up at the ranch house, where no light had been shortly before. He started running, a deadly fear in his breast that things had gone wrong. The light, he presently perceived, came from Hastings's office.

No one was in sight as Ben burst feverishly into the room. A lamp, turned high, smoked and flickered in the evening breeze that came softly across the range and through the open window. Close by the flaring lamp, weighted down by a mineral specimen, was a paper with writing on it. Ben Fowler's eyes glared fiercely as he read the message.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRAIL GROWS NARROW.

FOR one instant the ironic, sinister words scrawled by Bert French blazed before Ben's eyes in letters of fire. A leaden weight gripped his heart—the consciousness that he had failed miserably at the one time when he might have been of service to Judith. He stood motionless, stricken. The whole thing was only too clear.

"The polecat's taken her away with him," he dazedly muttered. "And me squatting on my haunches inhaling tobacco smoke like they was nothing else to do!"

Tardily the words "also known as Ben Fowler" registered on his brain. "Still hanging the job on me," was his thought. "That means he figures I've got away. But the point now is that French can't have much of a start."

Ben rushed from the room into the coolness of outdoors, eagerly listening for the faint sound of retreating hoofbeats in the distance. Nothing was to be heard.

Overhead a myriad of stars glowed in the cloudless sky, but Ben was insensible to the glory of the studded heavens. He shook his fist at the stars, whose soft twinkle seemed a hideous mockery of his distress.

"How'm I to know which way they've gone?" he cried in a bitter agony of helplessness.

Then like a swift inspiration came the thought of Lon Terrill, doubtless still a captive where Judith had left him. As a friend of Bert French it was more than possible that he might have definite knowledge regarding the other's plans.

Time was precious, and Ben sprinted for the place. Gun in hand he pulled open the door.

"Snap out of there!" was his curt command to the prisoner, who hesitatingly obeyed, evincing no particular joy on learning who it was that issued the order.

Lon Terrill could perceive that trouble lurked in the offing.

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"Come on over to Hastings's office," Ben added. "I want to watch you while we talk so's I can tell when you're lying. Make it speedy, hombre!"

Terrill glowered defiantly in the darkness, but judged it prudent to comply. Young Mr. Fowler impressed him strongly as being in no mood to stand trifling. Soon they were in the office.

"Being's you're such a close pal of that side-winder French," Ben said, toying with his Colt, "likely you know his plans."

Terrill's face, where the lamplight fell upon it, remained, on the whole, blank. Yet, Ben's keen eyes did not miss certain significant things; for example, a sullen craftiness which betrayed the presence of information. All that remained was to dig it out—by force or otherwise.

Ben grunted in satisfaction and fired an abrupt shot in the dark, to see what might develop.

"Who else is in on this cattle rustling besides you and Frenchy?" he barked.

Terrill betrayed little interest.

"You're raving, fellow," was his languid reply. "What would I know about any rustling? I ain't no rustler."

"I don't know just how much you know," Ben told him frankly, "but I do know that you're a damned poor liar. You sure tipped your hand by being so ready to make Hastings believe I was French. Also when French happens along just as soon as the whole Boxed Triangle outfit have boiled off on the trail of the rustlers, the stink is strong enough to smoke out a family of coyotes."

A trace of Terrill's listlessness vanished.

"So Bert's been here, has he?"

"Here and gone," Ben informed him grimly. "Miss Judith with him."

"She's been pretty sweet on Bert for quite some time," Terrill yawned indifferently. "Personal I'd pick one that was a little less abrupt acting than this Hastings girl. I don't like her style—much."

"I ain't interested in your opinions," Ben gritted savagely. "I don't admire your style myself, and it would sure be a pleasure to salivate you a whole heap. Trouble with that plan is I need you. Where would French take Miss Judith to-night?"

"How in hell would I know? He ain't asked me to be best man at his wedding."

Deliberately Ben cocked his .45, leveling the weapon full at Terrill.

"For your sake, hombre," he growled, "I'm sure hoping you've got valuable ideas on the subject; because if your brain is barren, I can't use you, and you're headed straight for the far side of Jordan—no return checks issued. Talk fast, hombre, or I'll save time by plugging you and then struggle on the best I can alone."

Terrill's figure seemed to shrink from the yawning muzzle of the Colt. This was the second time that evening he had found himself flirting with sudden death at the point of a gun.

The man's craven nature revealed itself, the yellow shining forth from his shifty eyes.

Ben's finger crooked experimentally about the trigger.

"I'm listening a lot, hombre," he said.

"They might have gone to Painted Rocks," Terrill mumbled, vainly trying to shift his body from the line of danger.

"Yeah?" Ben snarled, lips curling back in a hideous smile. "But I ain't asking where they *might* have gone. Hastings has friends at Painted Rocks, and they know Miss Judith. It ain't reasonable that French would risk his worthless neck by going there. I'm inquiring of you for the last time where they went. You must know what French would probably do."

Terrill, sweating with nervousness and deadly fear, knew well that he had gone the limit in stalling.

"I figure Bert would strike for headquarters," he muttered unhappily, "being's the rest of the boys are away right now."

"Rustlers' headquarters, eh?" Ben Fowler grunted. "And the crowd are busy rushing off Hastings's steers. Where's this dump at?"

"Up in the mountains. All of ten miles or more from here."

Ben wasted no time in considering a campaign; instantaneously his plan sprouted and grew to full flower.

"All right. We'll hit that way ourselves. And we travel by the shortest line, savvy? So we'll be waiting on the spot when French

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blows in. That part's up to you, because I don't know the country. If you're fond of life you'll play the game straight."

"I'll play straight," Terrill whispered.

"I bet you will," Ben told him coldly. "It's my business to see that you do."

Horses were quickly saddled, and the two men mounted, Ben prudently knotting his lariat around his captive's throat.

"Just so you won't be tempted to give me the slip in the dark, if you get a chance," he remarked. "I sure want you to live—for awhile anyway. How long depends mainly on you."

Terrill made no response save a grunt, and they started.

"Pour leather into that cayuse proper," was Ben's advice. *We've got to beat French to wherever he's going!*"

Onwards the horses thundered through the night, under the faint glow of the low-hanging stars, and Ben Fowler had no cause to complain of the pace Terrill was setting.

"Guess he's plumb keen to get there on time," he told himself sardonically. "A rotten crowd all through. He's willing to double cross his pal to save his skin, and it ain't unlikely he's worrying out a scheme now to double cross me when the time comes. Well, that's his funeral, not mine. He can't spring much of anything on me I ain't ready for."

Gradually they were drawing out of the rolling range country into the outposts of the mountains. Of necessity the reckless gallop of the horses slackened to a jog. Few words had been exchanged between the riders. Now Terrill spoke.

"I'm taking you by a cut up through Gunsight Pass," he said. "It's a lot harder traveling this way, but shorter. I have an idea French would go by the other trail. Generally he does."

"That's right and proper," Ben approved. "I'm hoping your hunch is correct."

"What's your plan?" Terrill demanded.

"I ain't saying," Ben rejoined coldly. "Your job is to do the guiding."

"I mean, where do I get off?" Terrill explained. "Do I get out with a whole skin, instead of holes in it, assuming I play straight? Because if you're counting on shooting me anyway, we might as well get it over now."

"You're kidding yourself, hombre," was Ben's brutal answer. "You'd never consent to being shot, now or any other time. You're too blamed yellow for that. But I'll make a bargain with you. If you play the cards my way *all along*, I'm willing to forego the satisfaction of salivating you, which is promising a lot."

Ben was silent an instant; then added wistfully; "After hearing what you told Hastings this evening I sure have been hoping for just one crack. But now the whole proposition's up to you, hombre. I'll play the game as straight as you do—*and no straighter*."

As they penetrated farther within the mountains the traveling became toilsome in the extreme. Finally the trail took them through a narrow V-shaped defile, a steep-sided, tortuous notch with frowning peaks of granite towering on either side.

"This is Gunsight Pass," Terrill muttered. "Our stamping ground is two-three miles down the other side."

"Let's go!" was Ben's brief response.

Conditions did not improve as the riders descended beyond the pass, and it was necessary to proceed as slowly as before.

"These birds sure picked a good section for their hang-out," was the thought in Ben's mind.

It was an hour or so after midnight when they finally came to a small open park, surrounded on all sides by the roughest sort of mountain topography. Near the center of the park Ben could vaguely make out a sort of cluster of lofty trees, and sheltered beneath them some sort of building.

"That's it," Terrill whispered.

Cautiously Ben sized up the place. No trace of light glowed anywhere about the building, which in itself seemed good enough evidence that French had not yet arrived. Certainly he would not hesitate to light a lamp in such an out of the way spot.

Yet Ben Fowler was disposed to run no needless risk. Forcing Terrill ahead he slowly approached.

"Give a hail!" he ordered in a low tone. "If things go wrong remember my first

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bullet's reserved for you. That's a promise."

"Hello, Bert!" Terrill shouted, repeating the call when he received no answer.

"We're ahead of 'em," he told Ben. "It would take French quite awhile longer to make it by the other trail."

"Where can we hide the horses?"

"Stable around back."

"O. K. We'll put 'em there."

They dismounted, and Terrill led the two horses around to the shed, Ben on his heels, gun in hand. Next they entered the log cabin.

"A nice little roost," Ben commented, appreciatively regarding the place under the flare of a lighted match. "Regular little fort. Two or three fellows could stand off a young army."

The match flickered out.

"The moon's due to slide up over the ridge any time now," Ben continued, "though durned little light will get in here. Must be dark even when the sun's shining. You sit in that chair by the wall," he told Terrill. "And just to keep you anchored I'll use a bit of rope." Thereupon Ben firmly trussed Terrill up in a chair.

"Now I'll know where you are if I want you sudden like," he contentedly added.

"You don't trust a fellow much, do you?" Terrill grumbled.

"No," said Ben, "to be frank with you, I don't. You think French will be along pretty soon?"

"He ought to. This is the one place I'd guess he'd strike for."

"I sure hope you're a good guesser, hombre," Ben said softly. "Here's a time when guessing wrong will be all-fired awkward for a certain party I might mention."

The moon, shrunk to a pitiful remnant of its splendor of the previous week, presently appeared above the mountains, bathing the little park in a feeble sort of glow. But as Ben had predicted, not much of the light found its way within the cabin.

Half an hour dragged slowly on, while Ben silently waited. At length a distant clatter of stones came to his ears. He peered eagerly through a narrow loop-hole which commanded the point where the trail entered the park.

A horseman appeared, in his arms a motionless figure, the two indistinct in the shreds of moonlight that filtered down into the park.

"They're a-coming," Ben whispered hoarsely. "Remember what I told you!"

CHAPTER VIII.

RENEWED SUSPICIONS.

AS Bradford Hastings swept off from the Boxed Triangle, a tumult of conflicting emotions ran riot in the ranchman's mind. Above all else seethed a black rage against the unknown rustlers who had thus dared to fling defiance in the teeth of law-abiding users of the great range.

It had been years since anything of the sort had happened in this section. Of course there had been slight occasional losses; now and then a maverick branded, perhaps by some cowboy ambitious to get a small start in the cattle industry; or a stray steer shot for meat. But those were unconsidered trifles.

The barefaced running off of a hundred and fifty fat cattle, almost ready for the shipping pens, was something entirely different. And Bradford Hastings swore a big oath that sooner or later he would hang the men responsible.

He had a shrewd idea that it might be later rather than sooner, not deluding himself into a vain hope that the present pursuit would be successful. According to Limpy Reynolds the raiders had approximately twenty-four hours' start, and that was a long time.

Other thoughts, even more unpleasant, began to inflict themselves upon the ranchman as he rode, and he was oppressed by tardy doubts as to the wisdom of his action in leaving his former prisoner at liberty. After all he knew nothing about this stranger who insisted that his name was Ben Fowler. He was a likable fellow, to be sure, and Hastings had been favorably impressed while talking with him.

Yet he recalled other likable, attractive chaps, who had been at heart black rascals. And Judith was somewhere about the ranch,

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or likely to return at any minute, to find the place in sole charge of the man who had recently been suspected of a murder; over whom, at best, still hung a cloud of doubt and uncertainty.

Hastings could handle men, but he always found himself strangely impotent when it came to this pretty daughter of his. Often he had reflected that he had been indeed a poor substitute for the mother Judith had lost when too young to appreciate how terrible a loss it was.

Had Judith's mother only lived, he told himself, his heart aching with a bitterness that long years had somehow failed to soften, things would have been far different. He and Judith were devoted to each other, and yet there was a vital something lacking; Hastings knew what it was—presence of the wife and mother who had been taken from them.

And now, while the hoof beats of his pony thudded beneath him, there arose in Hastings's mind a vague, uncomfortable suspicion that all was not as it should be at home. Half impatiently he tried to dismiss the feeling as the foolish product of an overwrought imagination.

"I'm worse than an old woman," he grumbled, striving to bring his attention back to the matter at hand—and only partially succeeding. The strange premonition still haunted him.

Hastings and his men picked up the tracks of the stolen animals without much trouble, about the time the waning moon appeared to lend them its feeble aid. The trail was an easy one to follow, and the pursuit swept on at a brisk pace, much faster, in fact, than the steers had originally traveled.

Toward daybreak, however, the trail dropped into a vast desert basin, a barren region of drifting, wind-blown sand, where all tracks of steers and horses vanished utterly within a hundred yards. Baffled, the members of the Boxed Triangle party pulled in their mounts.

"Just what I expected," Hastings told his men. "These lads know their business."

"One blind trail, I'd call it," a cowpuncher remarked.

Half a dozen scattered out, in hope of discovering evidence of the rustlers. Hastings watched, sunk in a peculiar apathy. His thoughts persisted in straying back to the Boxed Triangle. What was going on there during his absence?

One of the riders, some distance away, uttered a shout of triumph, bending from his saddle to pick up an object half buried in the drifted sand. He waved it aloft, spurring his horse toward his employer.

Hastings by an effort snapped his thoughts back from home; the cowboy had found a crimson handkerchief of silk, such as the more fastidious riders wore knotted about their necks in place of the conventional bandanna of cotton. These handkerchiefs, by the way, were useful as well as ornamental, serving to cover the rider's mouth and nose in a dust storm, a protection against the stinging, wind-blown particles. Obviously one of the raiders had lost this particular handkerchief.

Hastings examined the find. Letters seemed to be traced with ink in one corner, but the moonlight was much too faint for him to decipher them.

Hands trembling, why he hardly knew, the ranchman struck a match. The letters were B. F.—just as he had dreaded.

"We'll save this for evidence," he told the cowboys. "It'll be of value later, or I miss my guess. I judge the handkerchief belongs to Bert French, the man we've been wanting."

"Thought we had him," a rider muttered under his breath.

"There's not much chance of finding where our steers left the basin," Hastings resumed, "but whatever chance there is we'll take. I want you to split up and circle the Sand Flats country; try to pick up the trail again. Cover the whole basin. These steers are probably gone past any hope of finding, but the lads that took 'em will be back for more later on. If we can find which way the first lot went, we'll be all set for the next try. Report back to the ranch when you discover anything. I'm beginning to think there's more to this than the casual running off of a few steers."

Hastings gave a few further definite instructions regarding the part various riders

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were to take in the search of Sand Flats. Then he left them, heading straight for the Boxed Triangle.

In the meantime Pete Rawlins and his two companions returned to the ranch. With them they brought a riderless horse, the one which had brought Lon Terrill from Painted Rocks. To the three men the affair was very mysterious. Terrill had apparently ridden away; in any event they had picked up the fresh trail of a horse departing from the ranch.

Following the tracks had proven rather a slow task in the darkness, but they had at length overtaken the animal, only to find its rider missing. They could think of no reason why Terrill should abandon his mount in the open country, and Pete Rawlins finally was forced to the conclusion that the horse had perhaps run away from the ranch while Hastings was questioning Lon in his office.

But if that were true where had Terrill gone after Hastings dismissed him?

While this was going on the supply of oil failed in the lamp which Judith had lighted, so that when Pete and the two punchers arrived they found the Boxed Triangle absolutely dark and deserted.

They did not venture to explore their employer's office, and so missed the important note left by Bert French. Finally the three men went to bed, the chain of mysteries still unsolved.

Hastings himself appeared alone about nine o'clock the next morning. Pete, of course, could tell him nothing about Judith or Ben Fowler, and when Hastings entered his office it was with a feeling that portentous news awaited him there. He found it in the note left by French.

Bradford Hastings failed to read between the lines, taking the startling communication at its face value, as French had shrewdly hoped he might. To him it meant but one thing: Fowler and French were after all one and the same; whether the correct name was French or Fowler now made little difference.

This man, whoever he was, had killed the foreman of the Boxed Triangle, and with his accomplices succeeded in getting away with a hundred and fifty steers; then had finished by stealing from Bradford Hastings the one thing he most prized in all the world—his little girl, his Judith.

The face of the ranchman grew ashen gray under spur of the emotions within him. Slowly he raised his arms to heaven.

"Oh, God," he whispered, tears streaming down his cheeks, "what have I done to deserve this? But since it had to come, let me be the instrument of vengeance!"

So, for the space of a few seconds, Bradford Hastings stood, his arms outstretched. Then he slumped weakly into a chair. His eyes were dead, listless—all life and vitality drained from them.

Presently Hastings drew his gun, ejecting from the cylinder one cartridge. Into the soft lead of the bullet he scratched with the point of his knife two letters—B. F. Next he replaced the cartridge, whirling the cylinder until the branded bullet would be the next one to leave the gun.

"I'll kill him," Hastings muttered, "If it's the last thing I ever do on earth!"

CHAPTER IX.

NEMESIS.

IN the darkness of the rustlers' cabin crouched Ben Fowler, tensely waiting while French and his precious burden drew near.

The cowpuncher was held in the spell of a breathless expectancy. This was his chance to save Judith and regain at the same time his own self-respect, forfeited when Bert French had succeeded in abducting the girl under Ben's very nose.

The horse stopped close to the cabin, and Ben heard the rider grunt as he swung himself and his prisoner to the ground.

"Here we are, Judie!" came to Ben's ears. "You're going to be reasonable, aren't you? Mebbe I have seemed a bit rough, but you ought to know I'm not a bad chap at heart. If you do your part we'll get on fine together."

Judith replied; only a few words, and those spoken so softly that Ben missed their import. He gathered that she was vainly pleading with French.

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"Don't be foolish, Judie!" the latter responded impatiently. "No use going over all that again. We've come too far for you to expect any change in plans."

Then the door of the cabin swung open, and French was faintly visible in the moonlight, framed in the doorway. Ruthlessly he forced the shrinking form of Judith Hastings on into the dark room, the door clicking shut behind.

The next instant the deathly quiet of the building was rudely shattered.

"Look out, Bert!" came a sudden shout from Lon Terrill's corner "It's a plant. Fowler's here!"

There followed a crash as he tipped over the chair to which Ben had lashed him, hopeful that when the inevitable bullet arrived it would find the space vacant. The hope was vain.

Ben's Colt blazed—as he fired, not at the place where Lon's chair had been, but at the spot where his ears accurately told him Terrill and the chair had fallen. Lon uttered one strangled groan—after which he took no active interest in the proceedings; Lon Terrill was through.

Even as his gun roared, Ben dived to the floor, realizing that French, caught by surprise though he was, would certainly shoot at the betraying flash. The outlaw lived up to expectations, but his bullet thudded harmlessly into a wall, thanks to the quick-witted strategy of Ben Fowler, who dared not return the shot for risk of hitting Judith.

She had screamed once as the shots echoed in the narrow confines of the room; then remained silent. A moment later her voice came softly through the darkness.

"Oh, Ben! I think you're wonderful! But be careful. Don't move or make a noise. Bert—"

The words were abruptly stifled as by a harsh hand over her mouth, followed instantly by a snarl and savage oath from French.

"Bite me, would you, you little devil!" The sound of a blow landing on tender flesh—and a muffled sob from Judith.

At that young Mr. Fowler thrust his gun back into its sheath and went suddenly and and completely berserk. Heedless of consequences to himself, he lunged forward, conscious only that this ruffianly cattle thief had dared strike a girl, *his girl*.

French fired twice, twin flashes stabbing the darkness. Ben felt something like a red hot iron sear his right side, but the bullet merely grazed him; as a wound it was negligible.

One of his thrashing arms crashed into French's gun hand, sending the weapon clattering harmlessly to the floor. At the same second the outlaw's left fist landed on the side of Ben's head, and the earnest young cow-puncher perceived an entire solar system of brilliant lights circling dizzily before his eyes.

Bert French, it speedily developed, possessed no mean skill as a boxer; also in the gentle art of rough and tumble fighting. The savage fury of Ben's attack naturally faltered as a result of that chance blow on his head, French being quick to grasp this momentary advantage and follow it up.

He now forced the battle, sending in a rain of furious punches, which fortunately for Ben Fowler lost some of their effect because French could not see where best to land them.

Still groggy, Ben managed to keep his feet under the blows of his opponent, and gradually his brain was cleared of the mists which fogged it. Convinced that he was no match for French at this game, Ben instantly decided on different tactics, since Judith was apparently out of the way, in no serious danger from a bullet.

Ben had been keeping both arms busy covering himself from his opponent's vicious thrusts. Now his right hand dropped to the holster on his hip.

French must have sensed this plan through some strange telepathy, for before Ben could pull the weapon he closed in, arms circling the cowboy and pinioning the latter's arms to his sides. Ben struggled mightily to regain his balance, but the full force of French's hundred and eighty pounds overwhelmed him.

Backward he fell, both fighters crashing to the floor of the cabin, French on top. The back of Ben's head thudded like an iron weight and his body grew limp.

French grunted in satisfaction as he felt

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his antagonist relax. Cautiously he eased off the grip that held Ben's arms in bands of steel, and next with a growl he closed his fingers on the other's throat.

Too late he realized his mistake, for the limp body beneath him abruptly arched as Ben reached under his right hip for the Colt. Bert French knew his own deadly peril, seeming to grasp that now his only hope lay in the effectiveness of that fatal throat hold; his fingers dug in deeper, the man's whole weight on them.

A roaring like a thousand Niagaras sounded in Ben's brain; he could feel his eyes bulging horribly under the frightful pressure on his throat.

"Why, the son-of-a-gun's almost got me at that!" flashed through his mind.

Then the muzzle of his .45 jabbed upward against French's abdomen, and the gun belched its contents, the report sickeningly muffled. The grip on Ben's windpipe slackened. He gasped, and filled his throbbing lungs with air in a blessed spasm of relief.

Immediately Ben became conscious that Judith was crying close by; he rolled over, away from the loathsome contact of French's body, and at the sound of his movement the girl's sobs ceased. For one breathless instant the room was again quiet. Then she spoke, the shadow of an overpowering dread lurking behind the words.

"Ben," she whispered. "Ben, are you alive?"

"You bet I am, Judith!" Ben called cheerfully.

"Oh, Ben!" In her voice echoed a note of joyous thanksgiving, and then, inconsistently enough, Judith's sobs broke out afresh. "I was so afraid he'd k-killed you, Ben!"

She groped her way to him through the darkness, and Ben's arms circled her protectingly, as one would comfort a tired little child. And somehow, dark though it was, their lips managed to find each other without any trouble at all.

"I love you, Judith," Ben whispered. "Seems like I've loved you for years. I loved you when you came to save me that time, thinking I was French; I loved you last night, when you held up Lon Terrill on my account, knowing I wasn't French. And most of all I love you now."

"Ben," she sighed happily, "you'll always love me, won't you, dear?"

"You bet I will, Judith!" young Mr. Fowler huskily replied.

Bradford Hastings sat alone in his office at the Boxed Triangle, gazing out across the range country, where rain had made the green grass and flowers spring up like magic. Thus he had sat for an hour, and during that short hour the ranchman had aged ten years.

No report had come from his riders, searching the wastes of Sand Flats for traces of the rustlers. But Hastings thought of them not. Instead his mind dwelt in wistful unhappiness on the girl he had lost; the daughter who, apparently, had gone away with a man unworthy of her.

"Why did you do it, Judith?" he groaned.

A sudden tread of horses arriving at the ranch sounded without—two horses. Bradford Hastings hardly moved.

"The boys have stirred up something," he muttered listlessly, not caring what the news might be.

Nothing seemed to matter now. But then the ranchman recalled that common decency toward his faithful employees required that he show an interest in the results of their labor.

Laboriously he rose from his seat, went down the hallway where Lon Terrill had come to grief, and so outside. Abruptly he stiffened at the sight which met his eyes.

Judith was coming toward him, his lost Judith—and back of her the man whose initials were cut on a bullet in the gun swinging at his cartridge belt.

"Stand back, Judith!" The ranchman's voice cut the air like the crack of a bull whip. His gun flashed from its sheath. "I've been waiting for this chance, French!"

Judith's startled gaze grasped his intention even as her father's finger trembled on the trigger. Back to Ben she sped, face deathly pale, to shield his body with her own.

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"Daddy!" she screamed frantically. "Don't shoot, daddy! This isn't Bert French at all. It's Ben Fowler. Can't you understand? Ben Fowler instead of French!"

In a daze Brad Hastings passed a hand over his brow, staring bewildered at his girl.

"Ben Fowler?" he muttered. "Where's Bert French then?"

"Bert's dead—way back in the mountains," Judith told him soberly. "Ben killed him—to save me."

"Well, now that's good news anyway," said Hastings in a matter-of-fact tone, and briskly he shoved his pistol into its holster.

The haggard, ashen look departed from his face as he looked toward young Mr. Fowler, who grinned rather sheepishly.

In a hysterical mixture of sobs and laughter Judith ran to her father, whispering in his ear. Hastings nodded understandingly.

"Well, well," he chuckled. "So that's the way things have broke, eh?"

Judith gave blushing assent, her eyes downcast. Hastings turned to Ben Fowler.

"She says she wants you," he smiled at the younger man, "for keeps, too. And somehow Judith's always managed to get what she's had her heart set on. So I reckon that's all there is to it. Shake, son!"

THE END

PETER GREEN'S WATERLOO

THE rowdiest boy in our school
Was old Green's son, named Pete;
He was what's called "a fightin' fool,"
And teachers were his meat!
Lem Brown he taught for half a term,
And then came Moses Tyng;
Then Aaron Shadd—a humble worm—
Who lasted till the spring.

When Lem he tried to thrash young Green,
'Twas Peter as thrashed *him!*
And Moses faded from the scene
With both his peepers dim!
Then Aaron, one day *he* got mad!
But quickly he went hence!
The last we see of him was when
He leaped the old brush fence

With Pete in hot pursuit! Well, *say!*
After that final whirl
Men teachers wouldn't come our way,
We had to get a girl!
Her name was Laura Briggs; and Pete
Starts in with some fool trick,
But—my! She yanked him off his feet
And grabbed the hick'ry stick!

Yep! Thrashed him to a fare-ye-well,
Him face down on a chair!
And how we kids *did* stamp and yell
To hear him howlin' there!
When she at last lets up, says she:
"Now sit down—if you *can!*
And don't forget *I'm* teaching, see?
And not some spineless man!"

Clarence Mansfield Lindsay.

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The Mad Movie

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Four Goliaths," "Soft Money," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

MARY CURREN, youthful and pretty, tries to make a living in motion pictures rather than ask aid of her wealthy uncle. She faints while appearing in a big pageant scene and narrowly escapes losing her job as an extra girl, but Sterling, the director, sees a chance to turn the accident into an asset, and promotes Mary from extradom to a small part. That evening Mary runs across Billy Gibson, a wealthy young man her family had known in more prosperous times. Billy takes Mary and her chum, Etta, out dancing, and Mary is seen and recognized by Sterling, the director, who claims several dances. She feels that he may try to trade on his position as her employer, and Billy, too, becomes jealous, and by tipping a studio employee heavily becomes an extra in the Sterling production. The leading woman of the film, who knows that Billy is a millionaire's son, invites him to call on her. It is now Mary who is jealous.

CHAPTER VI *(continued).*

BILLY MEETS A REAL STAR.

BILLY had always admired Mary, though he had never reached the point of making love to her. In the old days he had often thought pleasantly of the possibility that he and Mary might marry some time in the future. There was no hurry, for they were both young, but she was the prettiest and nicest girl of his acquaintance.

Love requires opposition to burst into flames, and it needs obstacles and romantic circumstances to burn fiercely. Theirs had been a comradely, pally sort of friendship which might never have become romantic had things continued as before the death of her mother.

Now Mary was a different kind of girl; she had vanished from his ken for months, and her absence had intrigued him. He found her under circumstances that were most interesting. Even this weird studio, with its quick transition from grandeur to misery, its pompous settings without roof

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or ceiling, its mélange of mysteries, its queer blending of theater and machine shop, was a breeder of thrills and romance.

If Mary was becoming jealous of his apparent friendship with Estelle Clairton, why not make her more so? He knew she did not love him now, but she might if she thought some other woman was getting him away from her. Yes, he would cultivate Estelle, but he would also call at Mary's home despite her prohibition. Etta would assure him of an entré.

The day waned gradually. A few shots were made outside the palace; the mob seethed and foamed. The beggar who had been talking to Estelle rushed out of the mob and was killed by a shot from the musket of a sentry on the palace wall. Billy observed that they had been careful to provide him with an old-fashioned gun, not a modern repeating rifle such as he had seen used in more than one costume picture.

CHAPTER VII.

MARY MAKES A DATE.

THE girls were changing into street attire when a page appeared at the door with a note for Mary Curren. She glanced at it and saw that it was from Sterling. He had not forgotten her. It read:

> My dear Miss Curren:
>
> Pardon my not appearing to see you on the set today, but it might start gossip if I appeared friendly. I would like very much to have you accompany me to the studio of a chum of mine who is throwing a party in Greenwich Village to-night. There will be a crowd, and I am sure you will enjoy it. Phone me at the Hotel Mammoth about eight o'clock if you can come. Sterling.

She thrust the letter in her handbag with a triumphant air. So Mr. Billy Gibson was currying favor with the star. Well, she was welcome to him. The big director had singled her out from all the mob and wished to continue the acquaintance made the night before. To be sure, she had not liked him, but he probably had been drinking or he would not have been ungentlemanly. The studio party sounded interesting; she had never been to such an affair.

She would not have accepted an invitation to a tête-à-tête dinner or supper, but surely it was safe enough in a crowd. After all, a woman must use what weapons she possesses to get along in this business. How furious Billy would be when he found that she had accepted. He had a date with the Clairton woman for to-morrow night and flaunted it in her face. She would show him when he turned up at the flat pretending he wished to take Etta for a ride, but really to persuade her to accompany them. She would have an engagement, and she wouldn't tell him with whom. Let him find out if he could.

Billy was waiting for her at the exit and attempted to assume possession of her. "My car is right outside here," he told her. "I'll get you uptown in no time."

"Get into that chariot of yours in full view of the company? I should say not. What would they think of me? Run away, little boy—I am going to let the Interborough take care of me."

"Aw, come now, Mary."

"Good night."

"I'll be up about eight thirty," he called after her; but she did not turn to make a response.

Grumbling to himself, he walked over to his car, climbed in, unaware of the astonished gaze of two or three extra girls, and drove rapidly away from the place.

Mary found Henrietta prinking most carefully when she reached the apartment. "Dinner's ready," said the stenographer. "Gobble it up and get ready. Mr. Gibson will surely come, because he said so."

"I hope you will have a nice time," replied Mary sweetly. "I happen to have another engagement."

Etta's jaw dropped with amazement. "You have an engagement? Who with? Why, you haven't gone anywhere except with me since I met you."

"To-night I have an engagement."

"Look here, Mary—Billy will be awfully disappointed if you don't come. I know well enough he doesn't want to take me out except with you."

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"It's time that young man did something he didn't want to, for a change," retorted Mary, vindictively and rather meanly.

"But I won't know what to say to a fellow like that. I'm afraid he'll have a rotten time," wailed Etta. "I've half a mind not to go."

"Don't be an idiot. Put on your best dress. I'll let you wear one of my evening dresses, if you like; make him take you to the most expensive place in town, and keep him out until they shut the place up."

"Oh, will you let me wear one of those lovely French dresses? I'm afraid they'll be too small for me."

"Take your pick of the four of them; they may be a little tight, but you can get into them all right."

Etta's eyes shone as she opened the closet door and gazed at the treasures, relics of Mary's former social importance, which she had purchased in Paris the previous spring. "I think I'll wear the black one."

"Better take the lavender—it's more suitable to your style of beauty," said Mary, who intended to wear the black one herself because it set off her golden hair so charmingly.

"I suppose you are right. It's going to be wonderful, but I wish you would come. Who you going with, Mary?"

Mary was ashamed to admit the truth, so she evaded the question and began to eat her modest dinner. Afterward they bathed, assisted each other to dress, while Etta, by various hints, tried to discover what sort of function she was attending and with whom.

"You must have made the date to-day, because yesterday you didn't say anything about it. Mr. Gibson will be dreadfully disappointed."

"He'll get over it, and I'm not going to give you any information because you would be sure to blab to Billy."

"Cross my heart, hope I may die."

"Useless, little one."

"Well, I think you are mean," she declared, giving up in despair.

Mary was all dressed at a quarter of eight, and, not wishing to be overheard telephoning, said good night to her friend and left the apartment. From the corner she telephoned Sterling and found him waiting.

"Well, Miss Curren, this is good of you."

"It's charming of you to invite me. I have never been to a studio party, and it ought to be fun. When and where shall I meet you."

"I'll call for you at nine thirty at your home."

"No, don't do that. I'll meet you in the Biltmore at that time. I have something to do in the meantime."

This was a white lie, for she had nothing to do. She could not return to the flat without encountering Billy Gibson; alone, and in her regalia, she could not drop into a picture theater without attracting unpleasant attention. In the end she went to the Biltmore and sat in the lobby for half an hour. Working in pictures gave her patience. Several men noticed her, considered that she had been left flat by some one with whom she had an engagement, and made advances which were deftly discouraged.

Just before nine thirty Sterling entered, looking rather distinguished in his evening clothes, and scholarly with his bow spectacles, which he had not been wearing the night before; perhaps that was why he had not impressed her.

"It is wonderful to find you so prompt," he declared, bending over her hand. "My, but you are a vision in your glad rags! Isn't it a funny thing that I didn't notice you in the ballroom scene before you fainted? But when a fellow is working he does not pay much attention to any one in a crowd. I must make up for lost time."

"What sort of a place is it to which we are going?"

"Jeff Tibeau, an artist friend of mine, has a big studio down in the Village, and whenever he sells a picture he gives a big party. There will be a flock of film folks there, and after the shows are out a bunch from the theaters will come down. He has lots of good liquor, gets in a bunch of nigger musicians, pulls up the rugs, and we eat, drink, dance, and be merry. Some of the actors recite, and there may be a few solo dancers. Jeff is a live wire, and in his place the sky is the limit."

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"Sounds rather appalling. I hope we won't meet any of the principals in our company; they might resent an extra girl being there."

"Kiddie, when you are with me you are the queen of them all, and don't forget it. I'd like to see any of those hams try to Ritz a friend of mine. Besides, I don't think any of them will be there. Aside from Estelle, none of them have any class, and she couldn't get away from old Jake Reingold. You know you look a little like her. Same style, same sort of figure, but take it from me you have it all over her in looks. You might pass for a real society jane if the gang didn't look too closely."

"You flatter me," said Mary, with veiled sarcasm.

"We might as well go down. We'll be a little early, but time for a few drinks before the mob piles in."

She accompanied him docilely to the taxi-cab, but already Mary was beginning to regret her boldness in coming. Sterling was not the real thing, and what he might turn into if he got half drunk she was afraid to imagine. He had given her a sample of his manners the night before. However, in a crowd of people he would have to restrain himself. Mary didn't yet know the crowd. During the taxi ride Sterling behaved with exemplary constraint while he talked in his breezy manner and hardly gave her a chance to make a remark.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STUDIO PARTY IN THE VILLAGE.

THEY ran rapidly down to Washington Square, made a few turns into side streets, and stopped before an apartment house. An elevator shot them to the top floor, and before they reached it they heard the droning of a saxophone and some hearty female laughter.

"We're not the first, that's a cinch," said Sterling.

The door was open, and Jeff Tibeau himself was framed in the doorway. He was a tall, dark man, faultlessly dressed, with long, black, curly hair, and a wisp of a black mustache.

"Well, if it isn't the old sheik himself, and a dainty little dimpled darling. Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf."

"Can that stuff!" commanded Sterling, embarrassed.

"Can nothing. Let me look at you, baby."

Without asking permission, he grasped Mary by the waist, lifted her a foot, and kissed her full on the mouth. It was over so quickly, and she was so stunned by his audacity, that she could not say a word.

"Old Jeff kisses them all. Otherwise they can't come in," he explained with a ringing laugh.

"You've got a hell of a gall," declared Sterling. "I haven't kissed her yet myself."

"And if you have any sense, you'll never let him," said the candid host. "The last eight girls he kissed died of poisoning."

Mary's cheeks were flaming, but there was nothing she could say. Tibeau was obviously harmless and good-natured, the kiss meant nothing, but the atmosphere, as she sensed it already, was much too free and easy.

"Come in and meet the gang," cried Tibeau, grasping her by the hand and dragging her inside. Sterling followed rather sullenly.

The room she entered was extraordinarily large, fully forty feet long by thirty wide. A huge artist's window occupied most of the wall opposite the door, the roof was beamed and raftered like a huge garret, and stained dark, as were the walls, to imitate one of the Bohemian ateliers in Paris.

The resemblance stopped there, for the floor was polished oak, upon which were strewn several valuable Oriental rugs. A beautiful grand piano occupied one corner of the room. Several stunning unframed paintings, mostly nudes, were hung on the walls; there were two superb davenports, many big overstuffed chairs upholstered in tapestry, and at the farther end of the room a model throne, the chair set upon a very wonderful rug. Against the wall was placed a big easel upon which was a large veiled canvas.

Several young men and girls sat about

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the room conversing more or less quietly, but from another room came shouts and screams of laughter.

"What a lovely studio!" exclaimed Mary.

She did not flatter, for despite incongruities the artistic sense of the owner had evolved a very effective interior.

"Child of my heart," declared Tibeau, "this is nothing. Wait until you see the most marvelous example of interior decoration in New York."

"Why wait?" questioned Sterling, coming up and taking Mary's other arm. "Let her see it now."

They led her toward the noise, opened a door, and Tibeau paused expectantly for her burst of admiration.

They were looking into a small barroom. A mahogany bar was the principal item, with a polished brass rail in front of it. Behind it stood a white-coated bartender with a round red face. Back of him was the buffet laden with bottles of all colors, sizes and descriptions. Above it was a frosted mirror. Pasted on the mirror were several signs of former significance:

"Positively No Checks Cashed."

"Minors Not Served."

"No Rough Stuff."

Upon the rail were several high-heeled gold and silver slippers belonging to beautifully dressed girls who were drinking whisky straight from small glasses. Half a dozen men also lined the bar, one of them holding a girl in her unaccustomed position of one foot on the brass rail.

"Look behind you," said Tibeau.

On the back wall was a big painting, horribly done, of a red-haired nude woman. It was framed with a heavy gold frame and was covered with pink mosquito netting.

"I painted it myself," he explained, "in imitation of the old-fashioned barroom nudes. I think I did a good job."

But the shriek of joy and recognition they had expected from Mary did not come. How could it? She had never seen a barroom in her life, and the verisimilitude of the place meant nothing to her.

"What is it?" she asked. "A saloon or something?"

"Listen to Little Bright Eyes," cried one of the girls at the bar. "Isn't she innocent? She's the original baby who asked: 'Mother, what is beer?'"

This sally brought forth a wild shriek of laughter, in which all, including the bartender, joined.

"Christen her," said Tibeau. "A good stiff whisky is what she needs. Give her a drink, bartender."

Mary had sipped intoxicating liquor on several previous occasions, but she had not enjoyed it. She had no desire in the world for the drink which was being forced upon her. On the other hand she wished to be a good sport, and she dreaded the ridicule of this crowd. She took the glass and drank a bit of the contents. The fiery liquid, which she had never before tasted without mineral water to dilute it, burned her throat, some of it went down the wrong way and brought on a fit of coughing which caused tears to roll down her cheeks.

Somebody slapped her on the back, drinks were lifted all around, and for the moment she was let alone. She succeeded in laying the glass, half full, upon the bar, without attracting attention.

The girl was thoroughly frightened at her situation. She had supposed a studio party would be attended by prominent artists who would sit around discussing art, perhaps dance, and take a cocktail or two. Several of these people were drunk already and the party was only starting.

If she insisted upon leaving, she would anger Sterling, whose friends would ridicule him; they would call her a prig and a prude, and any influence upon her career from his good will would be eliminated as a matter of course. So she dissembled.

"What a wonderful place!" she smiled. "I must look around to see what else there is to see."

She stepped out of the barroom without being followed, and moved about the big studio. The population of the studio was in couples and paid her no attention, which pleased her very much. She moved from one painting to another, and admired, because they were worthy of admiration. Tibeau was a fine painter; his ideas were striking, his color sense remarkable, and his models had been admirable, though she

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supposed that he idealized them. Finally she found a comfortable chair, lighted a cigarette, for she felt that she attracted more attention by not smoking than by smoking, and waited in trepidation to see what would happen.

Tibeau was called out to greet irruptions of guests. They came in groups of from three to ten. They piled their outer garments just inside the door and immediately scrambled toward the barroom.

Mary promised herself that she would dance continuously. On the dance floor she would be comparatively safe; she dreaded the barroom with its fiery liquids and she hoped fervently that Sterling would stay there. She had her wish for a while because all the girls against the bar knew the director. They entwined him with their arms and he had to drink with all of them as frequently as the barkeep could fill them up.

But the jazz music drew the revelers out of the saloon, the liquor blended with the music, they wished to indulge in motion. Sterling came in search of Mary and found her.

"Where you been, kid?" he demanded. "Lots of fun in there, but I had to have the first dance with you. Come on."

She rose and they began to glide about. Sterling held her so tightly that she could hardly breathe, and the liquor had made him amorous.

"Something about you gets me, Mary," he informed her. "You got the great director eating out of your hand. You certainly are the daintiest, sweetest little dove that Oscar Sterling ever cuddled.

"I am glad you like me," she managed to tell him.

"Like you? I'm crazy about you, and when I say I'm crazy about you it's a compliment, because I've seen 'em all; the most beautiful in the world. Mostly I pass 'em up, but for you I'm breaking all my rules."

"Please don't break any rules on my account."

"I like to break 'em. Give us a kiss."

He tried to kiss her as they danced.

"No, no, please," she pleaded. "Not now. Not here."

"Oh, all right," he declared magnanimously. "You don't want to be afraid of this crowd; they don't think anything about it. Look at that pair will you."

He pointed to a couple who jazzed past, their bodies so tightly entwined that they seemed one, and their lips glued together in a kiss which lasted until they twirled out of sight.

"This is no hotel ballroom," he told her. "We can dance here and there ain't any hotel floor directors to put us off the floor."

"I can't stand public demonstrations."

"I get you, kid. I'll arrange for privacy a little later."

The horrible dance was terminated by a tall brunette who grasped Sterling roughly by the arm and said:

"Oscar, old boy, drop that baby doll and dance with a dancer."

Without waiting for a reply she twisted Sterling away from the grateful girl and gamboled off with him. He threw her a kiss as he receded and Mary sought her seclusion, but not for long.

At this party introductions seemed entirely dispensed with. A fat man with a good natured face and a slightly soiled dress shirt caught her as she reached her chair and drew her back into the dance. He was content to dance, and he danced badly, but he took no liberties. He was so wrapped up in his stepping that he did not converse, and Mary welcomed him even when he stepped on her feet.

The room was rapidly filling up. All chairs were occupied and girls were sitting in men's laps or on arms of the chairs. Several groups seated themselves, crossed legged, on the floor. The barroom was congested, but negro waiters with trays of highballs assuaged the thirst of those in the studio. The din of conversation rose above the music, and the musicians brayed on, apparently without fatigue.

Mary saw the brunette drag Sterling, nothing loath, into the crowded barroom and she welcomed the sight of his back; she invited the fat man to ask her to dance with him several times; lied about his dancing, flattered him so that he would not fail to come.

Half an hour later she saw Sterling come out alone and search for her but he was un-

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steady on his legs, his eyesight was a bit blurred and he was easily induced to stop to talk with all the girls who hailed him, who were legion.

The rugs had been rolled, pushed to the side of the room where they served as cushions for scores. By eleven thirty there must have been a hundred and fifty people in the place, and dancing was a succession of bumps and apologies which were unheeded.

She could see Tibeau moving about, always hilarious but apparently fairly sober. He embraced all the girls, patted all the men, forced drinks where they were not needed; in fact, a jolly host.

Mary found herself beside a pretty girl with black hair parted severely in the middle. She was wrapped in a fur coat and beads of sweat ornamented her temples.

"You must be very warm," she said. "Are you going home?" How she would like to accompany her!

The girl arched her delicate jet black eyebrows.

"Home? At this hour? How absurd. But it is warm. I guess I'll drop this coat." She threw it off with a deft motion and stood almost naked, with only breastplates and a short grass skirt upon her lithe body.

Mary gasped with astonishment, so sudden and brazen was the motion and the costume.

"I'm going to dance later. I'm in the Summer Garden Revue," explained the young woman.

"But you can't stand around in that costume."

"Pooh. I'm used to it and they're too stewed to pay the least bit of attention to me."

But she was wrong. A man dashed at her, picked her up on his shoulder and danced out on the floor with her, kicking and wiggling.

The dancers parted for them laughing uproariously. Mary edged in behind some standees and gazed in horror.

"It's Zuleika," she heard some one say. "She's the best stomach dancer in New York. Lets make her dance."

A voice was raised calling for the solo dance. Tibeau, always obliging cleared the floor, and the orchestra began to play a tantalizing Oriental melody. Her captor released Zuleika, who slid out upon the floor.

That was a dance. The girl planted her two feet firmly, and during the entire dance did not move them. Her art consisted of waving her arms and moving her abdomen and her hips. If such things are art she was a great artist. She was repulsive, suggestive, lewd, aggravating and repelling. Mary finally covered her face with her hands, for she had never seen anything like this, and it humiliated her that a woman should so degrade herself.

A man laughingly pulled her hands away from her face and then she shut her eyes. She heard the wild and savage burst of applause. Men all around her began to caress the girls, who usually responded freely.

Zuleika was followed by a man and a woman dancer, both nearly nude, who were more acrobatic and less suggestive in their work. At the finish she locked her bare legs around his waist, threw out her arms and he whirled her, her head only a few inches above the floor. One of the girls inadvertently stepped within the circle of the dancers, the girl's head and arms collided with her and, such was the force of the swing, that the spectator was knocked down and both girl and man fell upon the floor.

Fortunately nobody was hurt, the accidental conclusion was greeted with brutal laughter, Tibeau was on hand to assuage all the participants with fresh liquor, and everybody was happy—save Mary. She slipped near the exit hoping to retrieve her evening wrap, but it was at the bottom of a pile which was four feet high and she could not rummage without advertising her intention to depart.

The dancing began again, but there seemed more girls than men and Mary was not the only wallflower. She paid no attention to an argument between a girl and a man who had stopped dancing near her to finish their squabble. Finally the man grasped the arm of Tibeau and this is what Mary overheard:

"Millicent says you painted her over

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there exactly as she is, and I say that no woman can have a figure as good as the one in that painting. How are we going to settle the argument?"

"Easily," said the painter. "Strip her."

Willingly the young man grasped the shoulder straps of her evening gown and began to pull it off of her.

The girl screamed and the man persisted. Finally she said laughingly:

"I give up. You'll tear my dress. I'll undress by myself."

Instantly Tibeau was in the middle of the floor holding up his hand to stop the music.

"Millicent Green," he announced," was the model for my painting of Psyche over there on the wall. To prove that I didn't improve on the originial, she is going to pose for us as Psyche."

The girl was already out of her dress and audaciously dropping her underwear upon the floor. In a couple of minutes she stood beautiful and stark. Tibeau lifted the naked woman in his arms carried her to the model stand and she struck the pose.

Aside from the indecency of the exposure she was a wonderful and lovely picture, her white satin skin gleaming under the electric lights. She held the pose for a few seconds, kissed her hands to the applauding throng, and covered herself with the rug which lay across the model throne. Meanwhile the satyr who had caused the situation picked her garments and vanished into another room with them.

"My clothes, bring back my clothes!" she wailed, as she saw him escaping.

There was a burst of laughter. Sterling, who popped up from somewhere, grasped a corner of the rug, pulled it from her and left her nude again. The girl sank into a sobbing heap on the platform.

"Here, have a heart!" protested Tibeau, recovering the rug and wrapping it around her. Then he picked her up in his big arms and conveyed the living bundle in the direction in which her clothes had gone.

By the end of this degrading episode Mary Curren was so infuriated and humiliated at having been, perforce, an assistant at such a revel that she was determined to depart despite all hindrances, with her cloak or without it. She elbowed her way through the laughing mob toward the exit to find more excitement ahead of her. Two men were carrying an inert young woman whom she recognized as the girl who had jeered at her with the phrase: "Mother, what is beer?"

"What's the matter with her?" she heard somebody demand. "Is she dead."

"Yes, dead drunk," retorted one of the pall bearers with a drunken titter. "She just passed out at the bar. Can't have dead ones cluttering up the bar, space too valuable. Here's a good place."

With this he and his friend dumped the unconscious girl upon the big pile of wraps and coats, and toddled off without another look at the victim of too much conviviality. The girl's clothing was disarranged as she dropped, revealing the whole of one stocking and a triangle of white thigh. In view of what had just taken place on the model stand, this interested nobody.

Mary stooped and pulled down her scanty skirt, felt of her forehead which was clammy wet, tried to revive her, but the young woman would be out, in all probability, for several hours. It was Mary's first sight of a completely intoxicated girl and it unnerved her. The victim could not have been twenty years of age.

"Out of the way kid," said a male voice behind her. "We got another one to keep her company."

They placed, not too gently, a second unconscious female, this one over thirty and rather plump, beside the first sleeper.

"Here's where we check cloaks, coats and drunks," laughed the man. "Come on kid, you got a couple of pins left, lets dance."

Mary had no option since he half dragged, half carried her out on the floor, but drunk as he was, he could dance very well and he made no other overtures.

"Do many girls get intoxicated like that?" she ventured to ask him as they whirled about.

"Sure. By morning half of them will be laying around, and a lot of the fellows with them."

By morning! Good heavens, was this thing going to keep up all night? In some

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way, somehow, she must make her escape. She dreaded rushing out into the night of Greenwich Village in an evening dress without a covering, but she feared more to remain where the company was growing momentarily more drunk and the men more dangerous.

At the conclusion of the dance her partner rushed her into the bar and she found herself with a glass of whisky in her hand before she knew what had happened. Being well lit himself, completely unaware that he had not made her a welcome gift, he did not observe that she dumped it into the big brass cuspidor.

Then she fled from him to come face to face with Sterling, her escort. His eyes were glassy, he was holding on to the wall to keep his feet and he blinked at her without interest; he did not know her, for which she thanked God.

Again she struggled toward the entrance, this time without much hindrance. Almost hysterical, she was trying to strangle the sobs which rose in her throat. She reached the door and flung it open. A young man in evening dress stood outside preparing to enter.

CHAPTER IX.

ENTER BILLY GIBSON.

MARY gave one look and flung herself howling upon his shirtfront.

"Oh, Billy, take me home, please, please take me away from here."

Billy Gibson gazed at her with the indignation of the decent male who finds his own kind of women frequenting the sort of resorts where he goes.

"Mary Curren, for the love of the Lord, what are you doing here?"

She beat on his chest with her little fists.

"Never mind that. I'll tell you later. Get me out of here."

"Where's your wrap?" he demanded coldly.

"At the bottom of that pile under those drunken women. Never mind it."

"I'll put my coat around you. Come on," he agreed, and they were out in the hall, breathing the blessed cool air and stumbling into the elevator where a leering operator took them down.

"Pretty hot time, to-night," the elevator man observed. "They'll have to use the freight elevator for most of them in the morning."

He got no answer for they swept out into the street and found a night hawk taxi driver who held his door invitingly open. Mary recovered quickly and sat up straight and still; she had a fair idea of what was coming.

"Perhaps you will have the kindness to inform me what Mary Curren was doing in a party of the toughest men and wildest women in New York?" he demanded.

"I didn't know it was going to be like that," she wailed.

"What business have you going to a Greenwich Village studio and who the deuce was rotten enough to take you there?"

Mary began to get angry.

"How do you know it was so bad?" she demanded.

"Oh, I've been to Jeff Tibeau's before."

"You have," she declared. "You have. Then there was an excuse for me for I had no conception that I was going into a vile den of degraded and degenerate men and women, but you've been there before. You knew what it was like. If you hadn't met me you would be there now, dancing and drinking with those horrible women. That's why you went there, with knowledge in advance of what it was going to be like. Billy Gibson, you are unspeakable, abominable. Don't touch me. I despise you. I thought you were decent but you are as bad as any of them."

Billy looked very uncomfortable. He had proposed to read her a lecture, and the tables had been deftly turned. He fell back on the old excuse.

"I'm a man of the world, and you are a well brought up girl. It's an entirely different thing."

"Probably by morning you would be blind drunk staggering around with a foul woman in your arms. You disgust me. A different thing, indeed!"

"Who took you there," he demanded. "I'll settle with him in the morning."

"You are a fine person to settle with

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anybody. I suppose you will hurry back there now as quick as the taxi will carry you."

"You can bet your life I won't," he declared. "I got the shock of my life when I saw you coming out of that Babylonian orgy. I'm cured. Mary, why don't you let me take care of you? This is no sort of life for a girl like you."

"Take care of yourself," she retorted weeping with rage. "You should offer to marry a respectable girl."

"Not so darn respectable, considering the sort of places you frequent," he retorted goaded to anger by her recriminations. When the words were out he would have given anything to get them back. If a woman in anger can say anything to a man and be forgiven, the man must be exceedingly careful how he speaks to a woman, particularly if he has the least excuse for an invidious insinuation.

Mary grew white with hurt and shame and said not a word.

"Honest, Mary, I didn't mean that," he pleaded. No response. Nor did she make any answer to his protests and apologies until the cab stopped at her door. Then she stepped out, refused his hand and fled into her apartment doorway. He pursued her.

"Mary, you've got my overcoat."

With a magnificent gesture she threw it from her shoulders, letting it fall upon the hallway. Then she ran up the stairs without a backward glance. He picked it up and went back to the taxi.

"Hell of a note," he grumbled. "I rescue her from a mob of satyrs and all I get is abuse."

He did not go back to Tibeau's, but drove to his father's house and slunk upstairs to bed.

Mary burst into her room. Fortunately, Etta was sound asleep. She undressed quietly and slipped between her sheets, sobbing softly and moaning for hours. It is sad to relate that Billy was in slumberland ten minutes after his head made a dent in the pillows. Such are men.

Down at Tibeau's the party continued with increasing warmth. Food followed drinks and drinks followed food. The dancing grew more and more licentious; the unconscious were strewn about in corners, and piled three deep upon Tibeau's bed. It was one of the most successful parties ever pulled off by that princely giver of entertainments.

CHAPTER X.

A SPY.

ABOUT the time a man gets old enough and intelligent enough to understand a woman he has lost his hair and teeth and beauty, and his knowledge is no good to him. At Billy Gibson's age the mental processes of a female are completely cryptic, a mystery which is utterly beyond his comprehension. Had he been wise enough to know that the hysterical terrified girl who flew into his arms at the exit to Tibeau's apartment wanted comforting and caresses, encouragement and assurances of safety instead of suspicion and rebukes, he might have induced Mary Curren, then and there, to renounce the film business, her career and her ambitions, in favor of a safe, warm shelter under the roof of his name.

Although it had not occurred to him for one second to suppose that she was mingling in a throng of that description because she enjoyed it, despite the fact that she obviously hated the place and its people to the extent of being about to run away alone, and he did not have sense enough to assume the rôle of heroic rescuer and protector; on the contrary he undertook to be a grand inquisitor. As a result he got his quietus.

Now Mary intended to show the impertinent Billy Gibson that he could not assume a dictatorship over her actions. What right had he to question her? She had given him none. If she wished to be a film star it was her affair; if she wished to attend wild parties, which she did not, why should he presume to question her in the face of the fact that, knowing in advance what it would be like, he was planning to attend as a guest?

Had Mary gone home alone from the party it is improbable that she would have ever turned up at the film studio; she was likely

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to abandon the film industry for some less hectic occupation, though she had no justification in charging against the film business the soirée of Jeff Tibeau and the lewd behavior of his models and guests, few of whom seemed to have been in the picture game.

By morning she had absolved the films, and no longer held so much rancor against Oscar Sterling. If he had been wrong in bringing her to a place like that, he had had no means of knowing what sort of a girl she was, nor how she would loathe it. Besides he had been good enough to favor her with very little of his attention after he got her there; aside from one dance he had not bothered her at all. How Billy Gibson would gloat if she did not go back to the picture studio. He would assume that he was responsible for inducing her to give up her career.

On the contrary, she would continue in the business until she achieved success and then, when her name was in electric lights and her face flashed on the screen in every theater in the land, she might condescend to meet Billy Gibson again and gloat over him. Then she inconsistently wondered if he would have the temerity to show up at the studio to-day and bribe his way in again. If he did she would not permit him to address a single word to her.

She rose at her usual hour but did not escape before Etta was awake.

"Hello," she said sleepily. "Have a good time last night?"

"Wonderful," Mary lied curtly.

"So did I. We went to dinner at the Roosevelt, saw a show, and had a little supper afterward and danced a bit. But Mr. Gibson had a headache so I came home about one o'clock. I think he was kind of sore that you were not along. He's coming around to-night because you are sure to be here."

"You took too much on yourself. I don't want him in this apartment."

"Is that so?" said the good natured Etta, finally taking umbrage. "Well, half of this place belongs to me an he can visit my half. If you don't like to look at him you can spend the evening in the bathroom or the kitchenette."

Mary sniffed and went out without saying good-by. It was the nearest thing to a tiff that the two girls had ever indulged in, so Etta followed her with surprised eyes, and then tossed her head indignantly.

"I wouldn't have a disposition like yours," she flung after the retreating film actress. Then she set about dressing for her day's labor.

On the way downtown Mary wondered what Sterling would say about her disappearance; how could she explain without giving offense. A heroine in fiction would have been so affronted by the man and his treatment of her that she would have refused to work for him again under any circumstances. Though Mary was as nice a girl, as pure and high-minded as any heroine of fiction, she was a real human being who was compelled to make compromises with her conscience because of practical affairs.

She had gotten her foot into the door at Tonmouth. At other studios she was unknown; she must try to stay where she was, put up with all she could, and only break with the place and its director when the situation became so difficult that there was nothing else to do. How many thousands of decent girls in all sorts of occupations are forced to come to such decisions daily because of the compelling influence of the pay envelope?

If there is a villain in this story it would appear to be Oscar Sterling, but he falls far short of the old fashioned stage villain in his dastardliness, unscrupulousness and general depravity. Sterling was in many respects a brilliant man, one of the leaders of his profession. He would not lie, or steal, or perform what his peculiar code of morals would consider a dishonorable act. To seduce a girl he would not drug her, or kidnap her, or give her a choice between death and dishonor. He would not knowingly place her in a position where she must choose between sacrificing her virtue and the life of her lover. He would have worried a bit over performing what he considered a dirty trick.

Because of his upbringing and surroundings, and as a result of his experiences in the last ten years, he did not take much

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stock in female virtue, did not consider it particularly essential or desirable. He had no intention of marrying unless he got "so stuck on a girl" as he would express it, that he couldn't possess her any other way. In such a situation he would marry. After all, divorces are easy. Either she would get one in a few years or he would, so what's the odds?

Up to the present he had not found it necessary to stand before a parson and he did not believe he ever would unless he got so liquored up and so crazy with desire that he did not know what he was doing. If he did, he would not be faithful very long, and if the girl were true to him he would be rather surprised.

Sterling's point of view was not confined to the motion picture type of man. It is the secret attitude of many men in all sorts of occupations in the great city of New York. It was based and partly justified by the attitude of all the women such men are in a position to know.

That the vast majority of women in the United States are honest and virtuous, attend church from conviction and practice their religion, he did not believe because he was not acquainted with such people. That there were multitudes of men equally scrupulous he did not credit either, and if you proved it he would say they were darn fools.

When his advances were rebuffed by certain girls, and they had been, he did not set it down to the innocence and decency of the girls but assumed that he, personally, did not happen to appeal to them. He was not so conceited as to imagine that all women would fall for him. He would not have known what to do with them all if they had.

Such men are far more dangerous than stage villains because they are not intentionally wicked, are frequently agreeable and magnetic, and attract where the sinister individual would repel.

Mary had happened to appeal to him, and he proposed to follow the acquaintance to its logical conclusion. Here was an extra girl who wanted a lift up in the business, and he could give it to her; naturally she would permit him liberties. He could point to several film stars, and did not hesitate to do so, who got their start in the game by being nice to Oscar Sterling.

Unfortunately he had got so soused at the party the night before that he had forgotten about Mary, and when he came to his senses about six in the morning she had departed as had most of the guests who were able to walk. That was all right. She could not be expected to wait for him to sober up. He wondered mildly whether she had gone home alone.

It was fortunate for him that Billy Gibson did not dream that he had been Mary's escort. Billy, despite his presence at the party, had a rather wider knowledge of women, knew the sort of girls whom Sterling had never encountered and was prepared to champion any decent girl taken under false pretenses to a Bacchanalian orgy like Jeff Tibeau's. So while Gibson was going over in his mind every one who could possibly have taken Mary to the festival, Sterling did not once occur to him. Why should it? She had met the man only the night before in his company. Her kind of girls did not accompany strangers to studios. Not having any urge himself to succeed in pictures he did not comprehend Mary's point of view.

More than half the extras were dismissed that morning, but Mary, thanks to Sterling's interest, was retained, while another twenty dollars got Billy in, to the exclusion of a poor young man who needed the day's pay.

Billy was hanging around waiting for Mary to emerge from the dressing rooms. When she came she was accompanied by three or four girls all attired in court costumes, talking and laughing with them; she looked right through her knight of the evening before, which caused him to become almost despondent.

Sterling was on the job, although he had not been to bed; his eyes were bloodshot, he was unshaven, grouchy, dissatisfied with everything, but ready for business. He took her by the arm as she passed.

"How did you get home, kid? Sorry I passed out on you."

"I'd like to get my wrap back," she told him pleasantly enough. "I can't afford to lose it and had to leave without it."

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"Take an hour off at noon and taxi down and get it. You'll find a few of them still there sobering up. Some party, wasn't it? I'll ring you in on another soon."

"Not if I know it," she said to herself, but Sterling was called away and she continued alone.

"What was that big stiff saying to you?" hissed an angry voice in her ear.

She turned and surveyed Billy contemptuously.

"Will you kindly attend to your own affairs and refrain from addressing me?"

"Aw, say now, Mary."

But she had walked away from him.

Gibson was rather fed up on studios. Yesterday it had been a novel experience, but to-day he was bored, few of the girls interested him, Mary had a grouch on, he felt preposterous in his bright costume; he determined that this would be his last day in the place. He was mooning around when he was suddenly faced by the ubiquitous Abe Platt, the assistant director who had so strenuously objected to Mary having a fit on the ballroom floor.

"Say, young fellow, who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?" demanded Abe truculently.

"I'm just an extra man."

"The hell you are. I got the goods on you. You paid twenty dollars to get in here to see what was going on and you did the same thing yesterday. What's the idea, hey?"

"You are crazy," declared Billy.

"Yes, crazy like a fox. I know what you are and what you are doing here. You are a spy for Celebrated Players, that's what you are; you can't fool me. They're wild to know what we're doing and they want to steal Sterling's stuff. It's their money you spend to bribe our doorkeepers."

"Who the deuce are Celebrated Players?"

"Listen at him!" declared Abe to half a dozen people who had clustered at the first sign of excitement. "He don't know who are Celebrated Players. You should be in pictures and don't know them! Now you get out of here quick, but first take our costume off."

"Blatt, you're a fool," said a cool female voice. "Come here."

It was Estelle Clairton who had come to the rescue. She locked her arm in that of Abe and led him to one side.

"This guy is a rich friend of mine. He's got his Rolls-Royce parked outside. He's so crazy about me he wants to be where I am all the time. That's why he's here. Now you won't throw him out, will you?"

"I won't throw him out," said Abe grimly. "Reingold will throw him out."

"Listen Abe, you are a friend of mine, aren't you?"

"Sure, Estelle."

"Well, you better be, because Jake would can you if I lifted my little finger. Now you mosey off and mind your own business. If you spill a word to Jake I'll get you good."

He smiled at her sweetly. "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. I'll kiss him if you say so."

"I don't think he'd like it, so save your kisses for the extra girls."

"If I don't kiss you, you should worry," grinned Abe. "Wait, I'll fix it."

He returned to Billy who was standing alone, with a score of pairs of eyes upon him, for the charge that he was a spy of Celebrated Players had permeated the studio instantly.

"It's all right, feller," he explained. "Miss Clairton says she knows you and it's all right by me. You can stay."

"Well, that is nice of you," mocked Billy.

"I'm a good guy, I am." Thus they parted.

A few moments later Estelle glided close to him. She whispered in his ear: "I fixed it for you, Mr. Gibson. You are a real sport to show up a second time. Don't forget to take me to dinner to-night."

"You're on," said Billy gratefully.

Mary had watched the incident with Blatt from a short distance. She took a rather malicious satisfaction in seeing that he was in trouble and at the same time had a sense of fright, for she unconsciously had leaned on him, to-day, as a protector. With him out of the studio she would not feel nearly so safe. She frowned when she

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saw Estelle draw him out of his difficulty, and their whispered conversation did not escape her.

"He goes to wild studio parties and makes dates with movie queens," she thought rather bitterly. "Aren't there any decent men in the world?"

And yet, such is woman's complex, Billy was far more interesting to her in his new rôle of rounder and lady-killer than he had ever been when she thought of him as merely a very nice boy. Women proclaim that they want men to be good and are bored with them when they actually are.

At the close of work that day Abe Blatt dismissed all the extras. There would be nothing for them for a week or so. The next two days would be spent shooting scenes with the principals only and during the first part of the next week the company would be on location. So both Mary and Billy would be out of employment.

However, Mary got another note from Sterling.

> We are going Monday to the Catskills to shoot some scenes in a quaint old Dutch town I've found. We want about six extra girls to work as villagers. Pick out some of your friends, and I'll take them along with you.

She suddenly was promoted to a position of importance among the extras, an importance that she had not sought and did not desire, for the girls would be sure to draw a wrong conclusion from her influence with the director. However, they probably drew them anyway, so she took several girls, who had been decent to her, aside and told them of their good luck.

She could see in their eyes what they thought and it hurt, but she shrugged her shoulders. The effect on them was to cause them to fawn on her. They all accompanied her to the subway, wished to have her go to dinner with them, showed her in every way that they wanted to continue to enjoy her favor.

"You are in great luck," said Tessie Byron, rather enviously. "I could see that Sterling was interested in you from the day you fainted. Is he very nice to know?"

"I don't know him very well. He came over to our table when I was having some supper with some friends the other night, nothing more."

Tessie did not believe her, but she said: "Well, he's a very charming fellow, so they tell me. I wish he took a fancy to me."

CHAPTER XI.

ESTELLE ENTERTAINS.

BILLY had been both piqued and peeved at Mary's attitude all day; every effort to speak to her had been repulsed; apparently he had hurt her feelings beyond repair, and she had succeeded in evading informing him who her escort had been the night before; so he could not take his spleen out on the fellow. Well, she'd get over it, and in the meantime it might be fun to see what a celebrated movie star was like in her own home.

In his time Billy had met a few stage actresses and got to know some of them pretty well, but this was his first acquaintance with a luminary of the films. As far as he could tell from her appearance in make-up, she was a blond peach, and he didn't see any harm in cultivating her a little. He got a slight thrill of anticipation, and, being rather a blasé young man, he was grateful for the thrill.

Having changed his garments for evening attire, he put in an appearance at the Blitz shortly before eight o'clock, sent up his name, and was invited to ascend at once. He found Estelle waiting for him in the salon of her suite, a very effective affair in blue and gold; one of the most expensive corner suites in New York's most expensive hotels.

Without her make-up Estelle was still a very pretty girl, in style rather like Mary, though her face was harder and more sophisticated, and she seemed to be four or five years older. She also was small and very slender, a victim of a starvation diet. She wore a gold gown designed for her in the atelier of the best known dressmaker in Paris. A woman would have known it for an original design, but to Billy it was just a pretty girl in a pretty dress.

She held out her hand with a languid movement and did not rise from the big

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chair in which she was prettily posed. Billy kissed her hand with rather an extravagant European gesture, which gave Estelle a thrill. He did it for fun, but he knew how to do it; Estelle's men friends had good qualities, but courtliness was not among them.

"Gee," she said, "you do that like Valentino."

"He learned to do it from watching me."

"Aren't you the kidder? Pull up a chair and tell me what we are going to do? I'm starved, but, then, I always am. I haven't had a square meal since I entered the movies."

"What did you do before that?"

"Oh, nothing, of course. I graduated from Vassar and went right into pictures."

"What year did you graduate from Vassar? I know a lot of Vassar girls."

"Do you?" asked Estelle uneasily. "It would be giving away my age, so I won't tell you."

"You are young enough to give away your age. Come across, now."

"Well, I didn't exactly graduate. I left early because I had my career in mind."

"Listen, baby," said Billy; "save that stuff for the reporters. You never saw Vassar or any other college in your life, so cut out the hokum."

"How do you get so damn smart?" demanded the star indignantly.

"There are ways of telling that you don't know about. I've given you all the Vassar secret signals, and you didn't recognize any of them. Quit your kidding."

"Well," admitted Estelle, who swallowed his explanation without wondering how he knew the Vassar secret signals, if any, "I don't really consider a college education necessary for a woman, do you?"

"I hate educated girls; they always know more than I do. But be yourself, little one, if we are to be friends."

"You give me a pain," said Estelle, in a more natural manner. "My act is to be very refined, so my press agent says, and anyway, I have a good education if I didn't go to one of the old colleges."

"Atta boy! Where do you want to go now?"

"Why not have dinner here in my suite? There are reasons why I can't be seen about in public. It's one of the penalties one pays for being famous."

"Suits me. You can't beat the grub in this place. How can you stand the price of living in quarters like these?"

"Oh, I get a very good salary," she said nonchalantly, "and I do love elegant surroundings. I'll ring for the waiter and we'll have dinner."

The waiter was at hand, and she offered the card to Billy.

"I'm just having a fruit salad—dieting, you know. Order what you like."

"Mine's a steak and fried potatoes. Do I have to diet if I want to be a movie star? If so, I'm not a candidate."

"It's not so important for men; but, even so, you'll have to watch your figure, or you'll be playing comedy. Anna!"

A comely maid came running.

"Mix some cocktails and get a bottle of wine out of my cellaret."

"I'll say you are some hostess, but I thought I was taking you to dinner."

"Next time we'll run out to some quiet roadhouse in your big car, and you can foot the bills. This is my treat. I suppose you were fired along with the rest to-night?"

"Yep."

"We go out on location Monday, up in the Catskills. Say, here's an idea—why don't you run up there in your car and put up at the hotel? We could stage some parties in the evening."

"That's a real idea. I could bring up a basket of wine and quench your thirst after your day's labor."

"Fine. Tell me, who was that little blonde you were talking to just before we met yesterday?"

"She's a very nice girl. I used to know her very well before her folks lost their money. Her mother died, and she went in for pictures."

"Oh, really? Well, she's going pretty well for a beginner; she's vamped Sterling to a fare-you-well."

"Ridiculous! She wouldn't pay any attention to Sterling. He came to our table at supper night before last, but she didn't like the idea at all."

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Estelle laughed musically. "She's kidding you, Billy. She's chummy with Sterling; he sends her two or three notes a day. Nothing goes on at Tonmouth without my knowing it. And last night she went to a party with him."

"What?" exclaimed Billy.

"Positive."

"That's impossible."

"Is it? I was with Sterling and Reingold when she phoned him about eight last night where she was going to meet him. Here's our dinner."

Billy was aghast. Her information coincided with what he already knew. Then it was that rotten bounder Sterling who had taken Mary to Jeff Tibeau's.

And after her terrible experience of the night before she had boldly returned to the studio next day and continued to work for the man. That did not seem like the Mary he knew. Could she possibly have changed her character over a period of a few months? Not having had experience, he could not know how circumstances and adversity will modify character and principles in most people.

Billy's emotions were written more or less plainly on his face, and Estelle was watching him maliciously.

"Are you stuck on that jane, or what?" she demanded.

"No, certainly not, but it doesn't seem like her to be running around with Sterling."

"He has a way with him, though I am not strong for him myself. Besides, he can do a lot for a girl. I bet you anything you like she shows up in the Catskills, though we are only taking six or eight extra women out of a hundred who were working to-day."

"Even that might be a coincidence."

"Coincidence, my eye! How about eating your steak and drinking your cocktail? Here's to our better acquaintance."

He drank the toast mechanically. His heart was not in it. Poor Billy did not know how fond he was of Mary until he had reason to suspect that she was not all she should be. After all, she had been scared to death the night before, eager to be taken away from the place, and she had left Sterling flat.

The affair had not progressed very far. He would see that it was broken up, if he had to break Sterling's neck to do it. He recovered his *sang-froid* and jested and laughed with Estelle until she got into very good spirits. If she could not eat much, she could drink, and she emptied her wineglass several times during the progress of the meal.

Estelle wished to be on her good behavior with Billy, for with his position and money he was a marriageable proposition rather than a live one to play around with. If he should fall in love with her and wish to marry her, why not take him? It would give her prestige, let her get into a set in New York in which she craved to be.

Even Jake Reingold could not object to such an alliance, and he could be relied upon to keep his mouth shut. Jake was a good sport. No, Estelle didn't see why she could not become Mrs. Billy Gibson. Supposing his family did object, she had lots of money; social position was what she wanted.

In a buried phase of her career Estelle had served for a few months as a maid in an exclusive family on Park Avenue. What a triumph to marry into that set!

Billy Gibson would have laughed loudly if he could have read the secret ambition in that cunning little brain; he was simply killing time and philandering a bit; he would have married a girl of Estelle's obviousness as quickly as he would have had his right leg amputated.

The result of Estelle's idea was a pleasant and decorous evening which was interrupted about ten o'clock by a telephone call which she took upon an extension in the bedroom. She came out slightly flurried.

"I'll have to ask you to go now, Billy," she said sweetly. "I find that some friends are coming here for a business conference. Do let us have another party, and next time I'll go somewhere with you."

"I'm for that," he said heartily. "I certainly enjoyed this one. Shall I phone you?"

"Any night about seven. Don't you want to kiss my hand again? I liked it the way you did it."

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Billy complied politely and bowed himself out. Once outside, his rage against Sterling rose, and it was lucky for that dapper director that he didn't happen to be lounging about the hotel. It was too late to call at Mary's flat, so he ran up to her favorite motion picture theater and parked outside until the audience came out, hoping to find her and Etta among the throng. To-night, however, she was not to be discovered in the crowd which poured out of the Bonanza. Reluctantly he returned to his own home and retired early.

The business conference at Estelle's appeared shortly after his departure, in the person of Jake Reingold, who entered with a proprietary air and took possession of the biggest and thickest upholstered chair.

Estelle came and sat on his knee.

"I've been so lonely this evening, Jake," she said. "Not a soul called, and I had a solitary dinner—very, very bored I have been."

"Poor little girl," said Jake. "Fetch out a bottle of the champagne I sent you, and we'll have something to cheer us up. Business is terrible, and that's no lie. In the poorhouse I shall be with a couple more years like this."

"Yes; I feel so badly about you, but I got to have a thousand dollars; so take out your little check book and write on the dotted line."

"Women have stones instead of hearts," Jake groaned; but he complied.

CHAPTER XII.

TURNING BACK THE CLOCK.

TUCKED away in a valley in the Catskills, beside a swiftly flowing mountain stream, out of the regular route of tourists, unfavored by State roads, and exempt from auto traffic, is the village of Kraftsville, built by the Dutch before the English had made much impression upon the colony founded by the sturdy Hollanders.

It is a slowly decaying community, its young men and girls leaving it as fast as they are old enough to realize that they are out of the world.

It is over a hundred years since a house was built in the town, and there are many vacant homes to be rented for a very small sum, because their owners are all dead, or living far away.

Most of the houses are of brick or stone, constructed in the solid Dutch fashion; the main street is paved with round cobbles, the tavern is more than two hundred years old, and in front of its door swings a weather-beaten sign which was first hung there when Rip Van Winkle was a little boy.

The scene of Sterling's picture had shifted from Vienna to the Low Countries, necessitating the building of expensive sets in the studio or the discovery of a location which resembled what he needed. His scouts had brought him pictures of the Main Street and some of the mansions of Kraftsville, which had decided him to use it for several of the most important scenes in his photoplay.

It was about eleven o'clock of a Monday morning in spring when six automobiles full of actors and camera men and extras and props crept slowly down the hill and entered the main street of the village. To creep is the proper verb to describe their progress, for they had traversed twenty miles of hopeless country roads, through mud in which the wheels sometimes sank to the hubs. The actors were bespattered and weary, the cars were covered an inch deep with black, yellow, and red mud. They bumped over the round cobbles and came to a joyous halt before the ancient tavern.

The inhabitants of Kraftsville should have been arrayed in Dutch knickerbockers and wide, heavily petticoated skirts. The men should have worn big felt hats, and the women white lace caps with points over the ears, to be in harmony with their background, but they were not.

They wore the same sort of clothing as people in New York, save some of the men were dressed in ultra suits and the girls were snappier, if anything, than the picture girls in the cars. Why not? Are there not mail order tailors and dressmakers, and do not the funny little shops on the street sell what is considered the latest cry from Paris?

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Such things did not worry Sterling; he was well aware that the making of a picture in the village was the biggest thing that had happened since the Revolutionary War, and that the natives would joyously dress up in the Dutch costumes which were following on a truck, and participate, without dreaming of asking for pay, in the crowd scenes of the film. He was delighted with the looks of the place; knew that the owner of the garage would take down his sign, and that they could turn telegraph poles into trees and camouflage other evidences of modern times without the slightest trouble.

The old inn had not had forty guests at lunch for many years, if ever, but the innkeeper had been forewarned, and he had taken measures to satisfy the hungry arrivals. Everybody trouped into the inn, lined up in the washrooms, tried to get the caked mud from their faces, hands and clothes, and exclaimed and chattered over the quaintness of the place.

Estelle Clairton had ridden with Sterling, Annabelle Brown, Mary Jackson, Thomas Finch and Thurston Tomkins, her fellow principals, in a big limousine, which had protected the party from personal spattering. The remainder of the company were in open cars and had suffered aplenty.

Mary Curren and five girls selected by herself had come up in the same car and clustered together. They had to be careful not to intrude on the principals, and were not numerous enough to form a society of their own. However, this was a holiday, and Sterling haled them all into the common dining room where everybody, including the stars, sat at a long table and made merry over the lunch of steak and chops.

"No work this afternoon," Sterling informed them. "I've got to look the ground over and make local arrangements, and you folks can wander around by yourselves. Don't any of you girls fall for these village johns."

"I'm going to my room and rest," declared Estelle. "I was never so tired in my life."

"You should be worn out," shouted a camera man. "You ride in a closed car and don't get spattered. Look at the rest of us."

"I wouldn't have minded the mud," retorted the star; "at least you had fresh air, while these actors filled the limousine with tobacco smoke. It gave me a headache."

"You make me tired," snorted Sterling. "You smoked as much as any of us."

"For self-protection."

"Because you are a chimney," laughed Annabelle Brown. "You'll go up to your room and smoke all the afternoon. Got anything to drink? If you have, I'll go with you."

"Not a drop, deary. Bring your own booze."

The afternoon passed pleasantly for Mary. With Tessie Byron she poked about the village, snooping in the quaint old stores, entering, at the smiling invitation of nice old ladies, several charming, ancient houses. Most of these old ladies lived quite alone in big dwellings which once had resounded to the laughter of throngs of children. They lived comfortably in the old homes, preferring their solitude to dwelling in a corner of city flats with sons or daughters and their families; supported by loving remittances from their children, or upon small incomes left by departed relatives.

The houses were full of treasures of the black walnut period, the Chippendale and Sheraton periods and the Colonial times. Even the antique hunters seemed to have overlooked Kraftsville, or perhaps the prosperous old villagers had refused to listen to their blandishments.

One of the hostesses insisted upon giving the girls tea, which was poured into beautiful cups that had come over from Holland more than two hundred years before.

"There are only four of these cups and saucers left," she explained. "Originally there were twenty-four in the set. My cat broke one only last week."

As Mary estimated that any of these cups and saucers would bring a hundred dollars in a Madison Avenue antique shop, she thought that the cat was very expensive. She told the old lady how valuable she thought the china to be, but received a shrug of incredulity.

"Of course these are not for sale. They are heirlooms, and I shall keep them to my dying day."

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"Unless previously broken by the cat," thought Mary, but she said no more.

As they were returning to the tavern they observed a big automobile, yellow with mud, plough its way down the street and stop before the hotel. Despite its coat of dirt it had a familiar look, and Mary's lips compressed with indignation. Had Billy Gibson the audacity to follow her to this out of the way place, to thrust his unwelcome presence upon her, to cause her to be talked about in the village which was sure to be a hotbed of gossip?

"Wow!" exclaimed Tessie. "Look at that car. It's a Rolls-Royce, no less. How do you suppose it ever got through those mud roads?"

"If it got through it can go back," promised Mary, "along with its idiot owner."

"Do you know him? You wouldn't send away a fellow with a car like that."

"Watch me," retorted Mary.

She was standing at the doorway when Billy came up the path, grinning like a good natured pup. Tessie lurked within hearing.

"Hello," he greeted her. "Mary, darling, I'm glad to see you."

"I can't say the same," she lied, for in her heart she liked the look of him. "Don't you know better than to follow me to a small place like this where you will get me talked about?"

"What nonsense!" he declared, disappointed, but not surprised at his reception.

"It is not nonsense. That car of yours is enough to ruin the reputation of any poor little actress."

"I'll put it in the garage right away."

"Everybody in the company has seen it already. Besides you insulted me the night you brought me home from that studio and I haven't forgiven you."

"You know I didn't intend to insult you. You were calling me names and I got mad and said something I didn't mean. Besides I've found out since that you went to Tibeau's with that fellow Sterling, and I certainly don't think the Mary Curren I used to know would do a thing like that."

Consciousness that she had been at fault made Mary more furious.

"Consider the Mary Curren you used to know as dead. In her place is a girl trying to make a name for herself in a new business, at any cost, and this girl never knew you and doesn't want to know you."

"Oh, Mary!"

"It's true," she declared, lashing herself into a passion. "Now that you understand the situation I will thank you to leave me. I don't want my friends in the company thinking you are pursuing me."

"By friends, I suppose you mean Sterling."

"Perhaps."

"All right," said Billy, viciously. "Have it your own way. "You cut me off from your acquaintance, but I am going to stay here, just the same."

"And why, please?"

"Because I am not here to follow you, as you so politely put it. "I have a reason for being here."

"And may I ask what it is?"

"I don't mind telling you. I am here at the invitation of Miss Estelle Clairton, your leading woman. I am going to stay here because she asked me to. She isn't afraid to be seen with me."

Mary felt the ground cut from under her. She had put herself in the position of assuming that Billy was in love with her and had followed her against her will. She had treated him high handedly upon that supposition, and now he was laughing at her because he had come to see Estelle Clairton, was interested in her, was willing to hang around in the hope of entertaining her. It was a horrible situation.

"I think you are perfectly hateful," she breathed, and ran into the hotel. She continued running until she reached the room she shared with Tessie Byron, where she threw herself upon the bed and burst into angry and ashamed weeping.

"I guess that will hold you for a while, my proud beauty," said Billy to himself as he saw her retreat. "Now to get a room, and look up the merry Estelle."

He did not have to look very long. Estelle had got tired being tired, and was sitting by the window of her chamber in the front of the house with a cigarette in her mouth and a highball beside her when

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she had seen the car arrive but could not oversee the meeting between Billy and Mary because of the roof of the porch which jutted out beneath her window.

She had immediately gone to her mirror, made a hasty toilet, donned an attractive street dress and descended to the lobby. She encountered Billy as he was roaming about the small office wondering how to employ himself if Estelle was as short with him as Mary had been.

Estelle sailed out of the elevator and greeted him with both hands.

"I call this being attentive," she exclaimed. "Fancy you getting here the day we arrived. Did you get a good room?"

"I haven't been up to see. It's an awful small town, isn't it?" he replied. "What can one do here to amuse himself?"

"You can take me driving in your car, in the evenings."

He laughed satirically. "No thank you. The roads are impossible. I got mired two or three times on the way up. The car stays in the garage until I start back for New York."

"Well, we can have a lot of parties in our rooms in the evening. We'll play cards, have drinks and amuse ourselves. The hotel isn't so bad and we had an excellent lunch. Don't get discouraged and go away. Perhaps I can get you a job helping us make the picture, now that you are here."

"I'll stick around a few days and see what will happen."

"Come up to my room and I'll give you a highball. You look as though you had an awful down about something."

The down was caused by Mary's treatment, but he couldn't tell Estelle that, and anyway, the warmth of the star's greeting caused his ephemeral spirits to rise. The place might not be so bad and, when Mary saw how popular he was with Estelle, she might change her tune. He pursued her up the broad stairs, followed by half a dozen pairs of eyes belonging to members of the company, some of whom thought of dropping anonymous notes to Jake Reingold back in New York.

One of the girls recognized him as a young man who had been working as an extra in the New York studio; she told the others, which caused gossip to get to work. So Estelle Clairton was stuck on an extra man. What a budget of news that would be for Jake if anybody dared slip him the information.

Once inside the big chamber of Estelle, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him, which embarrassed him greatly. For the first time he began to wonder if he might not be going too far with Estelle and if there might not be some unpleasant aftermath when she discovered that he was using her as a stalking horse to enable him to track Mary.

If he had known what was in the mind of the unprincipled little blonde he would have dashed down to his car and fled Kraftsville that very night.

The day after his dinner with Estelle at the Blitz, the girl had called up a lawyer friend and asked him to get a report upon Billy Gibson which had reached her two days later and proved extremely favorable. He was the only child of Rutherford Gibson, who was worth, at a modest estimate, about $20,000,000. In addition he came into three quarters of a million dollars on his twenty-sixth birthday and the birthday was not far off. The Gibson family had never had a scandal and did not want one, and in case Billy did anything rash it was probable that his mother and father would make the best of it.

Estelle had decided to bring about a proposal from Billy and marry him quickly before he had a chance to find out his own mind. She was aware that there were rumors afloat regarding herself and Jake Reingold, but, as he was not on the inside in the picture business, he had not heard them, in all probability.

It was essential to entrap him before they reached his ears. In the event of his refusing to marry her, she had determined to compromise him, in the presence of witnesses, to a point where a breach of promise case would be profitable.

Estelle was a star but she was not yet one of the very high salaried stars. She could use a large sum of money which might be secured in settling a suit for breach of promise. However she would much prefer a marriage without any fuss,

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and, if Billy could be induced to marry her, she figured on making him a tolerable wife.

Her conscience did not trouble her in the least so far as her affair with Jake Reingold was concerned, and one or two less important affairs in which she had figured at an earlier period for, without being a heartless and thoroughly unscrupulous girl, she reasoned that many women with much more checkered careers had married millionaires and lived happily ever after.

She had hardly dared hope that Billy would keep his carelessly made agreement to come to Kraftsville, but now that he was here, in the same hotel, she did not see why she could not bring things to a head within the next two or three days. The presence of Billy in Kraftsville could not be concealed, and the fact that he had already served two days as an extra in the studio in New York was additional evidence of his interest in her.

A few walks about the town, a public kiss in the dining room or hotel lobby, a visit to his room at night at a moment when some carefully planted witness would see her; these would be sufficient to force Billy to marry her or make him pay dearly for jilting her. However, she had enough confidence in her own charms to believe that he would be a willing victim.

It is curious that Mary Curren had not entered into her calculations at all, though she had seen him talking with Mary the first day he visited the studio. She knew that Sterling was interested in her, and when Sterling was interested, he worked fast, and she had assumed that Mary was playing Sterling in the expectation of profiting in the film business; somehow it had not occurred to her that Mary might be an obstacle in her plans regarding Billy nor that Gibson might be seriously in love with the little extra girl.

She had made a mental note to get rid of Mary the first day, but the knowledge that the girl was in line to become Sterling's sweetheart had caused her to forget her intention. Despite her influence it would not be easy to dispose of a favorite of the powerful director.

And in the meantime the innocent William was sitting in her room sipping a highball provided by her and thinking that Estelle was a good natured, pretty and rather unintelligent little thing.

CHAPTER XIII.

A VAMPIRE AT WORK.

"STARTED your picture work yet?" asked Billy.

"We only got in this morning, and I've been resting all the afternoon. I expect that Sterling will have his locations and be ready to take some shots first thing in the morning."

"What are you going to do here?"

"You can search me."

"Don't you know why you came? Haven't you read the script of this picture?"

"There really isn't any script, you know. There was a book published, the rights of which Reingold bought. The scenario department fixed up a continuity, taking all kinds of liberties with the story, sticking in new characters, leaving out others, changing the period and the plot and introducing spectacular features. Then they turn it over to Sterling who does anything he likes with it.

"One of the big 'wows' in the picture will be a couple of sparrows making their nests and feeding their young. He spent a week getting that stuff before we began studio work. God knows what it has to do with the picture. When we finally turn out the finished product we'll probably change the name of the book, and if the author is foolish enough to go see the thing he will have delirium tremens."

Billy looked puzzled. "But why do you do things in this way?"

"Don't ask me. Probably because Sterling knows what the public will like, and gives it to them no matter what happens to the story he is working on. He's one of the cleverest and most successful directors, you know, and he has made this little company one of the most profitable of the independent concerns."

"What do you mean by independents?"

Estelle looked bored. "You don't know

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anything about the film business, do you? There are several big picture producers who own a chain of exchanges all over the country, and a flock of big theatres. These people get together and squeeze the producers who just make a picture and have no system of distribution, no connections with the trust.

" Reingold is an independent, but he has a lot of friends in the trust, and he makes good pictures so they take his stuff and handle it for him on a percentage basis.

" Of course they gyp him some, but he expects it, and he is grateful for what they give him, and he's a lot better off than many independents who have no influence. Often these fellows go out, make a picture at a cost of $50,000, and then they can't get it handled. They are in debt, and finally sell the thing for a lot less than it cost them, to the combination."

" It's not so different from ordinary commerce as conducted from Wall Street, after all."

" Well, it doesn't interest little Estelle, so long as the pay check comes in regularly; let's talk of something else. Do you like me?"

" Certainly, I do," said Billy.

" How much?"

" Well," he temporized, " I don't know you very well yet."

" I like you," said Estelle, candidly. " I like you a lot. I think we can have a lot of fun together. I have been very lonely; so few friends. A girl in my position can't fraternize with the people in the company."

" Why not?"

" Well—er—they might think I was cheap."

" It seems to me that they are perfectly nice people. Miss Curren is a wonderful girl, and would be very congenial to you."

" I hate women," admitted Estelle. " Besides this Curren girl is not so much. I bet you, when you came to my place at the Blitz, that she would turn up here, though they were only fetching six girls out of a hundred. She's here, all right, and not only that but she picked the other five girls that Sterling brought up. She wouldn't have any time for me, if I could associate with an extra girl."

" You may be right about Sterling being interested in her, but I know that Mary cannot be interested in him the way you intimate."

" Mary!" repeated Estelle acidly. " My dear boy, these girls breaking into pictures would sell their bodies and souls for a chance to get ahead. I don't blame them, I would have done it myself only I was lucky and it wasn't necessary, (hardly true). Why shouldn't they? A man plays around where he likes and comes to a woman with a hundred previous affairs on his hands.

" Once a girl is established in this business, with a salary to make her independent, she is as good as any man; she is famous and sought after, and doesn't have to marry to be supported because she can make more money than most of the men.

" If she happens to fall in love and the man loves her, he isn't going to let anything she may have done in the past keep them from being happy. There isn't anybody trying to marry your Mary now that she is poor and struggling; if they hold off until she is celebrated and rich, what right have they got to complain about the way she landed where she is? I don't say that this girl will land, because she doesn't look to me as though she had a particle of talent."

" But look here, you are leaving religion and morality entirely out of the question."

" Why should the women be the ones who have to worry about religion and morality? Churches were made for men as well as girls. As far as I can see the only people who will get to heaven, according to the ministers, are a lot of old maids; I prefer to go where all the nice men go, when I die."

Billy laughed. " You are a pure pagan. I can't contradict your argument but I know it's mostly sophistry, and you can bet your life Mary Curren has a different point of view."

Estelle's eyes opened wide and her mouth grew grim.

" Upon my word I think you have a crush on this Curren woman and I thought it was me that you were interested in. Let me tell you I am just as good as she is and a darn sight better, and you stay around

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here a few days and I'll prove it to you. Are you in love with her?"

"Why—er—no," lied Billy. "Anyway she is sore on me, won't speak to me at all. When she met me down stairs she told me to take my car and leave here."

"Doesn't want you to pipe off her game with Sterling," surmised Estelle. "Well, stick around with me, boy, and I'll show you a thing or two. Run away now because I've got to dress for dinner. Kiss me."

Billy kissed her obediently and it would be wrong to say he didn't like it, but it did not give him a thrill. Then he went to his own room and sat down to think.

It was obvious that Estelle was jealous of Mary and would go to considerable lengths to injure her. He did not flatter himself that she was in love with him; she was too hard to fall passionately in love with an innocuous young man whom she had only met two or three times.

Then what was her game? Did she expect him to fall in love with her and marry her? Fat chance! From her manner of expressing her views he did not doubt that she had gone through the mill before she achieved the position of a film star. And since she had no particular standing with Sterling, it must be some other influence which kept her where she was, probably Reingold, the owner of the company. He would have to step carefully or he would get imbroiled there in a most unpleasant manner. Flirting with Estelle was rather good fun, but if she was seriously after his scalp, well he didn't want her. He was in love with Mary.

He knew that he was in love with Mary because of the pang every insinuation by the other woman had given his heart. Once or twice his fingers itched to close around the white neck of the pretty serpent who was trying to poison his mind.

No doubt at all that Sterling was trying to win Mary, and the girl was using his softness toward her to advance herself in her profession. It wasn't the first time a young woman had kidded a man along to get something that he could give her, only to bring him up with a round turn when he presumed upon his services.

If Mary would be decent to him he would stand by and come to her rescue when needed; he would do that anyway, but it would be more pleasant if she did not treat him like the dirt under her feet. How could such a sweet and delightful little person be so mean to a chap whom she knew liked her very much?

He sighed, made himself comfortable in his room, shaved and washed, and after a time went down into the lobby. At the foot of the stairs he encountered Sterling. The director was returning from a busy afternoon's work. He had inspected half a dozen sites for shots on the morrow, and plotted his action upon the scenes. He had completely dismissed from his mind such trifles as Mary Curren, but the sight of Gibson recalled her, for he had met him the previous week at supper with Mary.

What the deuce was the fellow doing here, following her around? That was going to be disagreeable for he hated being bothered with rivals. On the other hand he was a rich young cub and possibly a useful acquaintance, so he decided to be agreeable.

"Mr. Gibson, isn't it?" he asked thrusting out his hand. "I met you last week in New York when you were with Miss Curren and a friend."

Billy didn't like to shake hands with him, but he did not wish to seem churlish, and after all the fellow had not done anything that he could affirm to be personal to him. So he shook the hand and retorted lightly: "Mr. Sterling, I heard you were going to make some pictures around here and I thought I might look on from a safe distance."

"Glad to have you, though we are not going to do anything very sensational. Come up to my room and I'll give you a drink."

"Just had one with Miss Clairton, thanks. I don't want another."

"Miss Clairton!" exclaimed Sterling. "Is she a friend of yours?"

"Yes. It was at her invitation that I ran up here."

"Well, well," exclaimed Sterling, suspicion and antagonism vanishing from his tones. "That's fine. Estelle is a great girl and a good sport. She'll show you a

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real time. Anything I can do, old man, don't hesitate to call upon me."

He ran up the stairs smiling; evidently the fellow had no special interest in Mary, it was Estelle he was pursuing. Good, and, if Estelle didn't mind her P's and Q's and started cutting up rough on the scene, he'd drop a bit of poison in Jake Reingold's ear.

Where the deuce was Mary? He had been so busy that he hadn't thought much about her since the night he had passed out at the studio party, but during this week in Kraftsville he proposed to pursue that little flirtation to its logical conclusion. As far as he was concerned the presence of the principals and other members of the company in the same hotel with himself and his little friend did not bother him. Gossip could not touch him, he did not even have a wife to annoy him with divorce papers if evidence of misbehavior were brought to her ears.

So far as Mary's reputation was concerned, he did not give it a thought; very likely it would not be her first affair nor would it be the last. In return for her favor he would write a little part into the continuity for her, take her, in several scenes, alone, and if she proved continuous good company, see that she got a real part in the next picture. What more could a decent fellow do for a girl in the film business?

Happening to meet Tessie Byron in the hall on the third floor he asked her where Miss Curren was living.

"She's doubling up with me," said that young woman with a sophisticated smile. "Number 17 on this floor. She's in now, if you want to see her."

"What's your name?" demanded Sterling. "I don't remember seeing you before. Were you working in the studio last week?"

"Yes," said Tessie with a sarcastic smile. "I wasn't lucky enough to faint on the set as Mary did."

"The next girl who tries that won't be lucky," he replied with a grin. "You're a pretty girl, just the same. Been in the game long?"

"I've been working as an extra much too long."

"You look like a good type. I'll keep my eye on you."

This vague promise filled the girl with joy. She smiled gratefully at him and continued on her way. Sterling instantly forgot her. He continued down the hall and tapped at the door of number 17.

"Who's there?" called Mary.

"It's me, Sterling."

"I'm dressing. What do you want?"

"I want to come in."

"Well you can't. I'm dressing."

"Don't be a silly little prude. I want to talk to you," he said rather testily.

Mary hesitated a second, felt a flurry of alarm, tossed her head, and opened the door. After all she wore a very pretty negligée. Sterling stepped in and dropped into a chair.

"Where have you been hiding, beautiful one?"

"I haven't been hiding," she said pleasantly. "You have been so busy you didn't notice me.

"Mr. Sterling, I did want to talk to you. I felt very much hurt that you should have taken me to that party last week."

"I don't blame you, kid. I had no business to drink too much and pass out."

"I don't mean that. I am sorry you misjudged me so that you thought it would please me to go to a place where men and women got drunk and did such terrible things. Just because I am trying to get a start in pictures does not mean that I drink and stay out all night. You wouldn't have taken your own sister to such a place, now would you?"

"I haven't got one," said Sterling, a bit uncomfortable. "Jeff stages good parties, there were some of the best known people in New York there. Everybody drinks too much since prohibition, and I didn't see anything off color."

"You must have been color blind. Why one woman stripped naked in front of a crowd of men."

"She was a model, and they do that for a living, but I didn't see any disrobing act. I guess I must have been soused in the bar. I'm sorry I missed it," he said regretfully.

Mary stamped her foot and her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, you don't get what I mean at all."

"I get you, all right. You want me to

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think you are different from the other girls. Well, I know that without your telling me, and that's why I like you. I'm sorry I took you to Jeff's if you didn't have a good time. In the future we'll just stage little private parties. To begin with I'll have a little table for two fixed up in the dining room and we'll have dinner together."

"But that will cause talk."

"What's the harm in talk? They'll talk anyway. Say, if St. Anthony was a picture director they'd be calling him Don Juan."

Mary laughed shortly because the man's egotism was grotesque.

"I am afraid I was not worrying about your reputation, but mine."

"Well, it's the same with you. There are lots of decent girls in pictures but nobody gives them any credit. What's the use of bothering about a rep? You haven't got any."

She thought of Billy's nasty dig the night he brought her home from party, and recognized the truth of what Sterling said. Of course Billy protested he did not really mean what he had said, but when he said it he might have thought it. And if she agreed to dine with Sterling he might leave now. It was the first time that Mary had ever entertained a man in her bedroom, and it gave her a particularly outraged and helpless feeling.

"All right," she agreed. "I'll dine with you to-night, but you must go now because I haven't finished dressing."

"How about a kiss?"

"Certainly not."

He grasped her suddenly and unexpectedly, caught her unaware and snatched a kiss, to receive a fierce box on the ear, then strolled out of the room. Mary grasped a towel and fiercely scrubbed her lips.

Strange as it may seem, she was not accustomed to kisses. She determined she would not do down to dinner, and then she remembered Billy Gibson, whom she had considered her property, who had come to visit Estelle Clairton, and who would probably be dining tête-à-tête with that bold-faced blonde. She would dine with Sterling, if only to show Gibson how little she worried about his affair with the film star.

Some day she would be a film star and she flattered herself she would be a much finer performer than Estelle. And while they were dining quietly she would contrive to make Sterling understand what sort of a girl she really was, and induce him to aid her in her career for purely platonic reasons; poor kid.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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RETALIATION

WHEN Dame Fortune brought him riches,
He held up his head so high
That he couldn't see his old friends
If they chanced to pass him by;
The chaps with whom he'd labored
Somehow didn't seem to be
Just the fellows that would fit in
With his new prosperity.

But Dame Fortune is a woman;
Though she's fair, she's fickle, too,
And his riches had all vanished
Ere a fleeting year was through;
Then he suddenly remembered
Tom and Ed and Bill and Jim,
But his old friends had his number
And were strangely blind to him.

Edgar Daniel Kramer.

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What the Storm Settled

By HERMAN HOWARD MATTESON

JESS was ladling mash into the little pans for a squadron of hungry baby ducks, when the sound of a dory grating upon the graveled beach caused her to jerk her head about suddenly. At sight of the gigantic fellow climbing out of the craft, her face for an instant lighted with a glorious smile and the brown eyes brooded lovingly. Then memory swept over her, and stern, irrevocable judgment, and her face grew hard and the brown eyes glinted.

"Why, Moos-moos Hendricks," she said carelessly, "what fetches you here? Quite an honor! Long time since your dory scratched our beach."

The big young man walked up the slope and came to a stop, his great splay hands resting upon his hips. He looked down upon her and smiled wistfully.

"You look awful good, Jess," he said earnestly. "You hain't pined a-mourning."

"Pine! Mourn! Not any more. I was fool enough to break my heart for awhile, after you left me to be the laughing stock of Puget Sound. But I can say honest I've never had a lonesome minute for two years!"

A bit proudly she waved her brown hand toward the neat garden plot, and the wire inclosed pens in which waddled about scores of fluffy yellow and brown ducks.

"There's money in ducks," she went on, "if you know enough to keep 'em from getting too many waggle worms on the beach. I make more money now than dad does.

"Not much boat fixing any more in this part of the San Juan Islands, only just a booze runner or a smuggler or a revenuer to fix up once in awhile. My ducks are extra fat and fine. Why, two or three times, when the duck growers over

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on Cottonwood Island and Lummi couldn't give away a duck, I got two or three cents over the Eastern market, and a boat came right here and took all I had. Not only that, but every Christmas the commission firm that buys my ducks sends me dandy presents—books, magazine subscriptions, lots of things. Why should I pine or mourn?"

Two angry spots of red burned upon her cheeks. She bit her lip nervously as she concluded her statement of the advantages and profits of the duck business.

"I suppose you came to see dad," she added, looking away from before the young man's steady regard. "Well, he ain't home. He's over to Orcas Island, putting a heavy duty engine in a tugboat, and he won't be home till day after to-morrow." With deliberate incivility, Jess turned her back upon the visitor and resumed her feeding of the hungry ducklings.

"I didn't come to see your dad, Jess; I come to see you about Tot Collins, my partner."

Passionately she whirled upon him. "Tot Collins! Your partner! The dirty rat!"

A spasm of pain showed upon the broad, weathered countenance of Moos-moos Hendricks.

"I come to ask about Tot," he continued evenly. "I'm worried about him. He left our cabin near a week ago. He never left word, no note, nothing. I've hunted all over the islands. Len Banner, over to Orcas, said he was sure it was Tot put in here this morning in a speed boat."

"Yes, he was here—him and another man," Jess admitted. "The vicious little runt."

"If you'd stop to think, Jess," argued the big man gently, "you wouldn't feel so pawky toward Tot. No. I'm the one you should ought to feel mad at, not Tot. I'm to blame for what he is. It's three year ago, the eleventh of next month, that I dropped a brail with a thousand pound of salmon in it on Tot, broke his back, stove him all up. I hain't none sure I didn't do worse than stave his back and break his legs and arms. I kind of figure Tot got stove in the head same time."

"The gear that dirty Chinaman keeps in his old cannery was all rotten, and broke," interjected Jess, "and that's what hurt Tot Collins. Everybody says so."

"I was running the donkey engine brailing the fish. I should ought to have knowed the gear was rotten. I did know it. I'm to blame for what Tot Collins is, just a joke of a man, three foot tall, looking more like one of them crook-legged king crabs peeking out of a hole than a man. I'm to blame."

Jess made a gesture of impatience.

"Well, *your* partner was here, with another man, early this morning. They came to have dad fix something about the engine in the speedboat they were traveling in. Dad fixed 'em up, and they left. That's all I know."

"Which direction did he go? I'm terrible anxious about him, him being so little and weak and stove up."

"I don't know which way he went. I care less. I hate him. As for you, Moos-moos Hendricks—"

The girl lifted her clawed hands as if she were about to strike the big fellow. A moment she stood thus. Then she clasped her hands to her face, burst into passionate weeping, turned and fled toward the cabin. In three leaping strides he had overtaken her, had seized her by both her arms.

"It's time to talk, Jess—talk plain."

Fiercely she struggled, crying out hysterically for him to go at once, never set foot upon her island again. But he lifted her and placed her upon the stump seat beside the cabin door.

Even then she continued to tell him to go.

"Night is soon down, Moos-moos," she said. "It's a long way to your cabin on Cypress Island. See the gulls flying high? It's coming on to storm. Better go, Moos-moos."

"My hide hain't afraid of the sting of salt chuck," he answered gravely. "It's no matter how she blows aloft, my storm is here."

He laid his big hand upon his broad chest. "I want you to listen, Jess—listen free from mad until I tell it, about Tot Collins, my partner."

Jess made a grimace of loathing, turned her face away, and stared out over the bay

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where the seas were beginning to roar sullenly under the darkening sky.

"I took Tot to the hospital, after I dropped that brail of fish onto him. When he come out, him that had been so straight and stanch, he wasn't much more than three foot high, all eyes, a tangle of crooked arms and legs, and a back like a chicken's breast bone. I done that to him. Women that looked at Tot, them scairt frog eyes of hisn, that crooked back, they either laughed or looked too sorry. Before Tot got his hurt he had a girl, too, Jess, like I had you, and them articled to marry, like I and you was. I took Tot home to my cabin. I—"

"My cabin," she exclaimed passionately. "It was pretty near *our* cabin, Moos-moos Hendricks. The ingrain carpet on the floor with lots of red into it, I picked out. The very curtains to the windows I hemmed with these very hands. You fed that miserable wharf rat of a Tot off dishes I chose. The very bed he slept in—"

"I know, Jess, I know. But Tot hadn't kith or kin. No money. I took him home to—to the cabin. You've wondered why I didn't come here and have my say, Jess. I dassent come; that's why. I'd 'a' grabbed you, loaded you into a dory and run for it, to Canada, away from duty. I dassent come.

"No, Jess, I couldn't 'a' trusted myself to come. Nights when I'd come in from the fishing, there Tot would set, like a spider, all eyes and crooked legs. He was thinking, Tot was, about his girl—his girl that he couldn't never have. Why, Jess, I didn't have no right to have a girl if Tot couldn't have one. No.

"Day after day Tot's eyes got bigger, them crooked legs skinnier. He was thinking about his girl. But I'm cunning, Jess—I tell you I'm cunning. They was a terrible purty calendar picture on the wall, picture of a girl with yellow hair like Tot's girl. I took and snaked that picture offen the wall and burned it up."

Moos-moos lowered his voice to a whisper and tapped Jess upon the shoulder with a thick forefinger. "I'm cunning, Jess. I laid all plans to a course. I figured I must do everything to keep Tot's mind offen his girl, offen all women. First thing I cleaned up on was music. Nights, me in from fishing, supper over and dishes did, I'd take down my accordion and I'd play and I'd try to sing. But I sheered off complete from tunes like 'Darling Nelly Gray' and 'My Sweetie Lou.' I just played and sung 'Big Jim Lathrop' and 'Throw 'Em Down, McClusky,' tunes that couldn't possibly remind Tot of his woman."

"All that trouble for that miserable rat," exploded Jess venomously. "I've heard, Moos-moos, how Tot Collins repaid you for your sacrifice. You paid a hundred and eighty dollars that he lost playing black-jack in the China house at the Apex Cannery. You'd pull a pair of ten-foot oars in the salt spray till your hands cracked open like a sun-baked mud flat, and Tot Collins took your money and bought whisky. Oh, I've heard!"

"Tot done a lot of things he shouldn't ought to," answered the giant without emotion. "Even that I figure is my fault. When I stove Tot's back and his legs, I figure I stove his head, his mind, and brain, too. It was my fault. But I was talking about keeping Tot's mind offen women."

The big fellow smiled sadly and shook his head. "The more I schemed to keep Tot's mind offen his girl, the more I kept on thinking about you, Jess. That made it dreadful hard to keep cheerful. It was special hard not to sheer into that tune you learned me, 'Beautiful Isle of Somewhere.' But I made up my mind to it, and I stand by. Long as Tot lives, I won't never play nor sing that tune."

"Moos-moos—" Jess started to say something. But the tenderness that for the moment had shown upon her face faded and she nodded curtly to him to go on.

"I was terrible careful to keep Tot's socks and so forth mended. A party rolling out of bed of a morning and jamming all his toes through a big hole in his sock is bound to think about women. He's bound to. I sneaked Tot's clothes out while he was asleep and mended 'em good with my sailor's palm and needle.

"The cooking come hardest. Man was never intended to Siwash along on just bacon and hot cakes. Man was intended to

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live on woman-cooked stuff with pie or puddin' once a day. I knowed if Tot set down meal after meal to just Siwash *muckamuck,* bacon and bacon and bacon, he'd get disgusted and get to thinking about women."

"The thanks you got, Moos-moos, for all your trouble!" exclaimed Jess. "You left me for everybody to laugh at, to be a slave to that whelp. While you were doing your best there was never a time Tot Collins wasn't complaining to every fisherman that landed on the beach how you didn't get him this and didn't get him that, and how if you were any good you'd make more money."

"Nobody would laugh on account of you losing the likes of me, Jess," he returned gently. "Far as Tot being dissatisfied, he likely had cause. I done what seemed the best I could. I hain't had a new stitch of clothes in two years. I never went nowhere. You know how plumb delirious I used to be about a dance, Jess. Why, even yet, if good lively fiddling was to start, I'd have to either dance, fight, or get out. But I didn't go nowhere."

Jess's eyes had grown bright and her breathing had quickened.

"Moos-moos," she said softly, "do you remember the dance over to Lummi on Thanksgiving Day three years ago? I'll bet you don't. What did I wear?"

His jaw jarred loose, and he began to stammer.

"Why—as to what you wore, Jess—But I recollect very clear how you looked." He leaned toward her in the darkness, touched lightly her eyes, cheeks, lips, with the tip of his forefinger. "Your eyes was bright as the Patos light on a winter night," he went on. "Your cheeks was kind of soft, warm pink like the very first rhododendrons of the spring. Your lips was red, red—I thought that night, and likely twenty other fellers thought it that dassent say it, you was the purtiest thing outside of maybe a mountain star flower that God ever made."

"Moos-moos," she said softly, "I kind of think you remember that dance."

"Yeah, I remember it. And other nights. It's been terrible hard, Tot setting, staring into the fire, how to keep my thoughts out of my music; but I done it. Cooking was hardest. I just figured if Tot was to notice the lack of woman-cooked *muckamuck,* he'd get to thinking how he'd never have a cook of his own, woman cook, and be just downright miserable.

"Private I sent and got a cook book. I hid it under a loose board in the galley floor. Nights when Tot was asleep, and I didn't have mending to do, I'd snake out my book and learn a recipe. You see, I dassent pull the book in front of Tot. I had to learn 'em by heart."

"It is getting late," broke in Jess ungraciously. "Hear that wind. It's a long row for a stormy night clear back to Cypress Island."

"Salt chuck hain't afraid of me. Besides, I want to tell you what I got to say. I was telling about my cook book. I can tell you the exact reckoning on how to chart out anything from apple sauce to zweibach. The only difference they is between Virginia cornbread No. 1 and Virginia cornbread No. 2 is that in No. 1 you rub the lard in cold."

"Hark!" Jess exclaimed, motioning him to silence. "The clock is striking two bells, nine o'clock. And just hear the way that wind howls!"

"Likely I had better be going," sighed Moos-moos reluctantly. "No use for me to hunt for Tot to-night. But I'm terrible glad I had this chance to talk to you, Jess. I never loved no one but you, never will. But you got to remember I made Tot Collins what he is, just a derelict. If he can't have a girl, a wife—why, I can't neither. As long as Tot lives—you understand. Natural I can't expect you to wait for me till Tot dies. To be honest, I've thought selfish that I wished you would wait. I even worked my cunning to kind of make you wait."

The girl laughed harshly. "How did you work your cunning? I've never had a scratch of a pen from you, let alone seeing you. Why, you never even sent me a valentine or a Christmas card. How did you work your cunning?"

"Them ducks, Jess. I bought them ducks. When the market got low I sent money by Len Banner to buy your ducks

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three cents over quotation. Them Christmas presents you got, Jess—I bought 'em. You got one on now—that little chain and locket.

"My idea buying them ducks was to keep you prosperous and contented. If you kept prosperous I figured you wouldn't go gallivanting off somewhere and get acquainted with a fish buyer or a boom boss. To work cunning wasn't fair. You're free, Jess, free as air. I can't expect—it might be years."

She rose from the stump seat, came to him, laid her hands upon his breast. Eagerly he reached his arms toward her, but drew them back. He wanted to snatch her to him, kiss her face, cry into her hair, act a bubbling fool; but he did not.

"Please go now, Moos-moos," she begged. "This—is terribly hard for both of us. Please go."

"Maybe so," he said, stepping back. "I'll go. But about Tot. You must have noticed which way he went when he left here this morning."

The girl, uttering little gasping sobs which she obviously sought to control, was pacing back and forth before the cabin door.

"Let me think," she said. "Let me think. I must think. It's strange that I can't think. What was it you asked me, Moos-moos?"

"Why," he said, marveling at her perturbation, over so simple a question, "I just asked which way Tot went when he left here."

"That way! That way!" she cried, flinging her arms toward the north and east. "Now, go, Moos-moos! Please, please go! This is torturing me!"

She seized him by the sleeve and urged him toward the beach. As he turned and walked with her toward where he had landed his dory, he let his arm go about her waist.

"Jess," he asked, "would it be a terrible bad mistake if I was to—was to kiss you, just once?"

She flung his arm from about her. "No! No! Please hurry! Hear how that surf is thundering on the rocks."

Where the grassy upland gave way to the sand and gravel of the slope of shore, she paused. The giant gave her a reluctant look, turned down to where his dory lay drawn up beside a dory that belonged to Jess's father. He turned, looked back up the hill to where she was silhouetted against the somber night sky, her skirts whipping violently in the rising gale. Then he shoved off the dory, climbed in, and fitted the long ash oars into the thole pins.

Moos-moos had rowed a quarter of a mile, his dory feeling the pitch and toss of the rising seas, when, ahead and to the right, a tiny yellow flame flickered as if some one had struck a match and was sheltering it beneath a coat. A craft of some sort shot by him, without lights, the noise of its exhaust smothered in the roaring of the winds.

Without doubt, he reasoned, this ship was seeking the shelter of Fossil Bay, at the upper end of Jess's island, there to ride out the storm.

But why travel without lights? Moos-moos rested upon his oars to think. Jess was all alone upon the island. That might be all right, and it might not. A lot of deviltry was going on these days in the farther islands of Puget Sound.

Moos-moos swung his dory about and headed back. Jess needn't know that he camped on her beach all night. At daybreak he would go on and resume his search for Tot Collins.

Heading back into the seas, the big fellow became aware for the first time of the terrific drive of wind and wave. But at last he made it, veered his dory in toward the beach where he had landed before.

He glanced up at Jess's cabin. No light. That seemed strange. He gave a shove on the long oars. The prow touched the gravel lightly.

He stood in the dory for a moment, studying the beach. Here was a circumstance stranger still. The big sailing dory belonging to Jess's father that had been upon the beach when Moos-moos left a few minutes before was gone.

Moos-moos climbed out of his dory, drew it up above the tide, ran up the slope to the cabin. He thundered at the door.

No answer.

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He flung open the door, struck a match. No one.

He turned back toward the beach, pausing at the crest of the hill, a point that commanded the bays on both sides of the island. Out in the turbulent waste of waters to the north a dory sail was moving, its course laid toward the Canadian side.

Jess was in that dory. It must be she. With a whimpering cry he leaped down the slope, fairly flung his dory into the water, sprang in. With a heave upon the oars that nearly tore the thole pins from their seats he drove the craft out into the open.

Now his course lay to the north, into seas far more savage than those he had before essayed. As his boat dizzied upon the crest of a comber he strained his eyes into the darkness. There, ahead, was the dirty white sail, bobbing about, now disappearing from sight, now riding the swell.

With all his Titan strength, tugging at the oars until the sweat ran down his face in streams, he drove his boat into the smashing combers.

Still the craft ahead, for all its perilous rolling and tossing, was making better time than he. But he kept doggedly on.

Now to the south blinked the Patos Island light. This meant that both the dories had crossed the line and were in Canadian waters.

As if this crossing of the line had been the objective of the dory, it now changed its course, sailing close to the wind, bearing away toward the mouth of the Fraser River and the treacherous rock shoals called Guichon's Sharp Teeth.

This was madness. In such waters, on such a night, no dory could long survive. For a precious moment Moos-moos rested upon his oars, cupped his hands to his lips and trumpeted with all the strength of his lungs: "Sta'board! Sta'board your helm! You'll swamp!"

In the mad howling of the gale the cries died away to nothingness. And the dory kept on, the buffeting seas crashing against its frail sides, burying it in a smother of spume and spray.

Though his arms felt as if they had almost pulled from the sockets, Moos-moos rowed on. Half a hundred frantic strokes he pulled before he forced himself to turn his head and look upon the fate of the foolhardy craft.

The dory still lived. It had come about and was heading into the seas, its sail flapping. Jess was standing erect in the pitching boat, her arms waving frantically as she tried to attract the attention of still a third boat that lay rolling helplessly a hundred yards farther on.

For just a moment the wind tore a rift in the scurrying clouds, and the starlight fell athwart the bay. That was a speed boat there ahead, with two men in it. She was water-logged full to the rails. One of the men was bailing frantically. The second, a diminutive fellow with a hunch back, stood waist deep in the water, making never a move to indicate that the outcome of the desperate situation was to him of the slightest moment.

A greater sea broke upon the doomed craft. It gave a tired roll and went down, the two men with it.

The dory with the sail was likewise in distress. With each succeeding wave she rose less buoyantly. The dory also was full almost to the gunwales. With the last vestige of his strength Moos-moos drove his dory forward and swung it about just as the dory swamped, flinging Jess into the seething waters. Feebly she struck out to swim, but a comber crashed down upon her and buried her from sight.

Moos-moos leaped to the bow of his dory. He flung out the anchor, which was attached to a ringbolt in the bow by fifty feet of line. The anchor would not reach bottom, but it would serve as a sea anchor and prevent the dory from drifting very rapidly. The instant that he had heaved the anchor he stripped off his tarpaulin coat and leaped over.

Three thundering seas broke one after the other about the dory before the giant fisherman came bobbing to the surface. One of his long arms was flailing the water mightily, the hand of the other was clutched into the back of Jess's waist.

In half a dozen strokes Moos-moos was at the back of the dory. He reached up and clutched the stern rail. When the next sea

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rocked the rear of the dory to water level he hoisted Jess up onto the thwart and climbed in after her. Then he dragged her forward to amidships and jackknifed her limp body across his knees.

But she had kept her head, had swallowed but little water. She moaned, turned weakly. He laid her in the bottom of the dory, spread his coat over her, drew in the anchor and set the oars back into the thole pins.

Now, with his precious freight aboard, he carefully negotiated the waves that, a few minutes before, he had insanely disregarded. Thus advantaged by wind and wave, he soon covered the distance that had before seemed interminable. Driving the craft ashore, he lifted Jess, bore her up the slope and into her cabin.

At once he got her into bed and kindled a roaring fire in the kitchen stove. Presently, when he had looked in upon her, she seemed to be asleep, so he tiptoed out softly and closed the door.

All about the stove he had disposed her sodden garments spread upon the backs of chairs. He was returning from fetching an armful of wood when he heard her call his name.

He entered the room as if it were a holy of holies, fumbled about the bedside and got hold of her hand.

"Moos-moos," she said, her voice still weak and trembly, "I overheard the talk this morning between Tot Collins and the man with him. They were planning to fetch a cargo of opium from the Fraser River to-night, across the line to Waldron Island on the American side. I heard them say that they would make Waldron by eleven and transfer the cargo to another boat. If you were to look now, Moos-moos, down in Fossil Bay I think you'll find the revenue cutter lying there, waiting to capture them.

"I sent for the revenue cutter to come, Moos-moos. I wanted Tot Collins in prison. Then I felt that you would come back to me. But I couldn't, after the talk to-night, Moos-moos, get you that way. So I put out in the storm to warn Tot Collins to turn back with his cargo, to return home to you, and never, never attempt another illegal deed as long as he lived. I was too late. The storm— They both drowned, Moos-moos. I saw them go down and never come up. Now you'll hate me. I've lost you after all. You might as well go, Moos-moos. I am all right. You might as well go."

"But I don't aim to go," he declared, dropping down upon his knees and reaching for her with those long arms. "I don't aim to go. There! There! Don't cry and take on! Why you dassent cry that way, Jess. No. There! Now you just lay back and take a sleep. You're all frazzled out from what you been through. I understand the whole shebang, and don't blame you none whatever. The storm has settled it for us, what maybe I and you never could. Now you sleep a mite, Jess."

He held her face between his great hands and kissed her. Then he walked quietly from the room.

Shortly after daybreak Moos-moos knocked upon Jess's door.

"I got something for you to eat, Jess," he called.

She bade him enter. He walked in, in one hand a tray with something on it that steamed. "I got a cup of hot coffee here, Jess, and I got one of them soufflés out of my cook book, the kind where you fold in a egg. I had terrible good luck with it."

"Why, Moos-moos, it looks lovely. What's that hanging over your arm?"

He stood grinning down upon her fondly. "Why, when I was drying out your clothes I found a stocking with just a little hole in it. I rummaged around, found a needle, and mended it. How's that for a man darn? It hain't bad. Now taste that soufflé and that coffee."

"Why, Moos-moos, they're fine. And no woman could have mended a stocking better."

His grin broadened. He stabbed a thick thumb at the viands upon the tray and dangled the stocking. "Unless you're sick, Jess, that there is the last soufflé ever I cook, and this is the last darned stocking ever I darn. Drink your coffee, Jess, while it's hot."

THE END

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Unhearing Ears

By ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

Author of "Gold from the Cañon," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I AND II

JOYCE LARUE faces a perilous situation while her cowboy sweetheart, Lin Columbia, is invalided from a bullet wound. Her mother, Mrs. Anita Tyrone, is heiress to a vast ranch through the death of her outlaw husband, "Black" Ozias Tyrone. But Tyrone's will provides that the villainous Noah Littlejohn shall remain as foreman one year. Littlejohn had become deaf through the underwater explosion of a revolver while he battled in a river pool with Lin Columbia. Joyce finds her mother has left the ranch, and "Slim" Cook, cowhand, is alone at the big house. A man's shadow mysteriously appears on the piazza floor; a bowie knife plunges unseen into the roof. Joyce hires a stranger, tall and somber, who calls himself "Snipe" Quimby. Frank Jennings, attorney, turns dictatorial over Tyrone's will, and Quimby lays hands on him until Joyce intervenes. Mrs. Tyrone secretly makes a will in her daughter's favor. Quimby is revealed as "Snipe-shooter" Quinn, a notorious bad man. Joyce suspects him of being Littlejohn's spy. The deaf foreman suddenly appears at the ranch.

CHAPTER XII.

FALLING SOOT.

JOYCE LARUE and Slim Cook had scrambled to their feet before Noah Littlejohn. The dictator kept the electric torch trained on the ground so that the light did not shine on any of them, while at the same time the faces of all were visible.

Littlejohn wore his customary "mail-order" outfit of cow-puncher garb—cheap chaps and cheaper boots, spurs not mounted with any precious metal, and an inexpensive, floppy hat that would have shamed any gentleman of the saddle who was worthy of the title.

Joyce found herself shuddering as she looked at him. The old fear of him had taken hold on her, and her hands were cold, her lips stiff and lifeless.

His weird face, doubly so in the inchoate light, looked more than ever like the face of a skull, over which scalded skin had been

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stretched to the breaking point. His thin, straight, hay-colored hair, his drooping shoulders, the reddish, sagging bloodhound eyes, as colorless and as expressionless as a dull-hued agate marble, his thin-lipped gash of a mouth, and the cruel little lines that were traced about it made the girl shiver with dread.

"Surprise ye?" he croaked.

"Well, somewhat," drawled Slim Cook, as Joyce failed to make response.

"I can't hear a word ye say, ye know," Littlejohn reminded him. "But I reckon I surprised ye, all right." He turned to the girl.

"They's another surprise waitin' for ye in th' house, Joyce," he told her, and a goblin grin overspread his repulsive features. "Yer maw's there. I brung her out from Spruce. We jest got here a minute ago. She's all wore out, 'cause she ain't used to forkin' a horse, and I made her ride hard in order to get to th' ranch to-night. I reckon she wishes she hadn't tried to hit th' trail with Noah Littlejohn."

"You brute!" muttered the girl.

"Correct word," said Slim Cook. "I wonder if they'd hang me if I was to throw down on this here old buzzard and kill 'im right now?"

"I been in th' house," said Noah, who, it seemed, did not realize that the two had been speaking. "First thing, I went into th' kitchen. There I found somethin' funny settin' up in front o' th' window. Look!"

He swung around and pointed. "Maybe ye c'n see it now. It looks pretty much like th' shadow of a man settin' in a chair. I galloped right out when I see it, and went huntin' around for you, Joyce. And here I stumble onto th' two of ye, hidin' in th' grass watchin' that funny shadow on th' window shade."

"He must 'a' got here while you and me was sneakin' around," was Slim's interpretation of the situation. "He left yer mother in th' house and went huntin' us. I wonder what he thinks."

Littlejohn was watching Slim's lips closely, while Joyce watched Littlejohn's eyes. She could not determine whether the deaf dictator of Tyrone Ranch had interpretated Slim's words.

When Slim ceased talking, Noah glanced quickly from one to the other, as if trying to catch one of them in the act of speaking. He was practicing lip reading, she knew, but how far he had progressed with his new problem she could not tell.

"Mighty funny thing to set up in a window, with th' shade pulled down, and it between th' shade and the lighted lamp," Noah proceeded. "Looked to me as if somebody that had been in th' house wanted somebody on the outside to think they was still there. And that same somebody—or, I'd better say them same somebodies—snuck outside to see if their little gag was workin'."

"There was some one sneakin' toward th' house," said Cook to Joyce. "I saw 'im, but I don't see 'im now. I was jest tellin' ye about it, Miss Joyce, when this ole carrion crow swoops down and spots us here. I couldn't make out who it was. One man, though, I'm pretty sure."

"How close to the house did he get?" asked the girl.

"Not close," replied Slim. "He was half-snoopin', slinkin' along. He looked pretty tall to me. Might 'a' been this here Snipe-shooter Quinn."

"Are ye talkin' about me?" asked Littlejohn suddenly, his colorless eyes fixed on them suspiciously.

Slim Cook shook his head. Noah smiled—or stretched the peeled-looking skin of his face in what he called a smile—and went on talking.

"I guess we better go into th' house," he said, "and investigate that there brown paper man. He int'rests me, that fella does. I'm wonderin' why he was propped up there. I want ye to tell me all about it, Joyce."

The girl set her lips. Then indignation overcame her, and she wheeled toward the house.

"I'm going in, Slim," she said. "I can't stand this any longer. I want to see mother right away. I guess you'd better go to-morrow morning. Don't forget what I told you, boy."

"I won't," Slim replied. "Good-by. I reckon I won't see ye again."

She turned back and impulsively held out her hand to him. "Stay in the game,

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Slim," she pleaded. "I need you. Good-by—and good luck to you."

"It can't be that ye're leavin' th' ole ranch, can it, Slim?" interjected Littlejohn, and a cruel sarcasm went with the words. "To-morrow mornin', maybe? Well, well! Too bad. Tired o' th' same ole thing, day in and day out, I reckon. Well, th' world's wide. Hop to it, cowboy! I wish ye well."

But Slim was already on his way to the bunk house and disdained to look back at his tormentor.

"Come, Joyce," said Littlejohn, with a world of confidence in his voice. He held out a hand to her.

She shrank away from him, cast a look of utter abhorrence into his repulsive face, and began running through the night toward the old log house.

She had not run far when she heard his footfalls pattering after her. She redoubled her efforts, and managed to reach the veranda fifty feet ahead of him.

As she dashed through the living room toward the kitchen, with the wild idea of getting the silhouette and thrusting it into the cook stove, she heard her mother weeping in her room. She cried out with anger, but continued on toward the kitchen, to carry out the business that she had immediately in hand.

As she hurled open the kitchen door she heard Noah's feet clattering across the veranda floor. She ran toward the table and the lighted lamp, then came to a stop before she reached them. At that same moment Littlejohn burst through the door behind her and he, too, came to an abrupt halt.

The chair before the window was empty. The brown paper bust of a man was no longer there.

"What'd ye do with it?" bawled Littlejohn, striding toward the girl. "I see th' thing jest before we started for th' house!"

Joyce turned on him and threw out her hands in a gesture which told of her ignorance of the dummy's whereabouts. Noah could see that she had not even reached the chair—he must know that she had not had time to grab the queer object and dispose of it before he burst into the room.

Trotting, he passed her and reached the stove. He grabbed the lifter from its nail, raised one of the castiron lids. Joyce saw the reddish glow of live coals.

Noah stared into the firebox, then wheeled toward the girl. "Not a sign of any new ashes," he said. "They ain't been a blaze in this here firebox for fifteen minutes. That there funny thing was never crumpled up and crammed in here to burn! Then where is it?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" screamed Joyce, almost beside herself.

But her voice carried a note of triumph as well as of puzzlement and mental suffering. The brown dummy was gone, and she realized that Littlejohn was as much in the dark over its mysterious disappearance as she was.

Had Slim Cook started running as soon as they had, beaten them to the house, entered by the kitchen door or a window, and made off with what he considered incriminating evidence? But the door was locked! Joyce remembered turning the key before they had left for their vigil in the tall grass.

With the bloodhound eyes of Littlejohn following her suspiciously, she crossed to the window, shot up the shade, and felt for the catch.

The window was securely fastened.

This meant that whoever had removed the silhouette had entered by the front door, as had she and Noah. Or else he had been hidden in the house all along.

"Locked?" demanded the foreman.

Joyce turned about and nodded her head.

"Look around for it!" he ordered harshly. "It wasn't burned in that there firebox, so it's still here in th' house. I watched all th' time I was running after ye, Joyce. Th' thing was showin' in that window until I run around t'other side o' th' buildin'. There wasn't no time between then and when we come in here for any one to git through th' front o' th' house, swipe th' thing, and git out again.

"They's somethin' mighty funny goin' on about this ranch, an' somebody's gonta pay for it dear, too! They'll pay me—Noah Littlejohn—hear me, girl! Somebody's hidin' in this house with that there paper thing. Help me find 'im!"

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He whipped out his wooden-handled six-shooter, gripped it fiercely. "I got no ears," he said. "You listen, Joyce. Keep close to me an' let me know if ye hear anythin'. By golly, somebody's goin' to th' smoke-house if I find 'im hidin' in here!"

"I *won't* take orders from you!" the tormented girl screamed at him; then tears of rage sprang into her eyes as she realized he could not hear one word that she had said.

What could she do? She was unable to make him understand that she refused to obey him. She could not let him know how she felt toward him until a quieter moment, when she might write her feelings on paper. Half crouched, his big gun ready for instant action, he was stealing across the floor toward a large cupboard in one of the walls. She watched, fascinated.

He threw open the cupboard door when he reached it, and darted to one side, his six-gun advanced waist-high.

There was no one in the cupboard.

Stepping on tiptoes, he approached the pantry door. This he swung wide with a swift movement. His electric torch sent a shaft of brilliancy into the somber shadows of the little room. But the six-shooter remained rigid in his hand, and no deafening explosion followed the opening of the door.

He spun about and faced the girl, his face writhing with malevolence, horrible in its devilish display of hatred.

"Where else?" he demanded.

Joyce's lips moved spasmodically, but said nothing. He glared at her for a moment, doubtless realizing her inability to aid him, and then he wheeled and ran lightly toward the door of the living room.

Joyce's mother was in her room just off the living room, and the ogre of Tyrone Ranch was speeding toward her. The girl did not know what had occurred when she and Noah first came into the house.

Whether or not her mother had seen the dummy in the kitchen remained a question. If she had, it might have been she who had removed it, thinking that in some way she was helping her daughter in doing so.

So the girl darted after the lank, stooping figure as it passed out of the kitchen. If Littlejohn intended to torture her mother about the matter, the breaking point would be close at hand. She whipped out her .38 as she ran.

She came to a quick stop just inside the living room. Littlejohn was standing, legs spread, in front of the huge stone fireplace. He pointed with the electric torch and the black mouth of the fireplace became radiant with light.

"Do ye hear anythin'?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper. "I thought I saw soot droppin'. Listen, girl! D'ye hear soot droppin' down th' chimney?"

Joyce stood quite still, straining her ears, her fascinated eyes fixed on the bed of fluffy white ashes in the fireplace. Those hazel eyes of hers were better than Littlejohn's and her ears were keen.

There came a tiny *plunk* in the billowy ashes, and Joyce saw a slight disturbance and a barely noticeable film of dust arising. A piece of heavy soot, or a bit of mortar, had fallen down the immense chimney.

Some one was up in there, perhaps climbing desperately for the roof outside. She heard a low scraping sound—then nothing more.

"Did ye see anythin'? Did ye hear anythin' drop?"

"Nothing," said Joyce, looking him squarely in the eye and shaking her head.

But just then, on the roof above, she heard distinct sounds, as if some soft body were rolling over and over on the shakes. Then there came the dull noise of a fall on the ground outside. Her face blanched; she looked again at Littlejohn. His colorless eyes were staring at the mouth of the fireplace and the ashes. He had not heard a sound!

He ran swiftly, threw himself on the floor, and crawled into the fireplace. With both hands elevated, one holding the electric torch, the other his wooden-handled revolver, he lay aiming up the wide chimney.

"Danged chimney throat's in my way!" he muttered, and squirmed to a new position.

Then, with a deep sigh, he crawled out.

"Nothin' up in there," he announced. "Le's see what yer mother's got to say about this matter."

The *mestizo* holstered her revolver and

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followed him toward her mother's room, but she kept her thumb crooked in her cartridge belt, just above the pearl handle of her weapon.

CHAPTER XIII.

MUFFINS OR BISCUITS.

NOAH LITTLEJOHN had the consideration to knock on the door of Mrs. Tyrone's room instead of opening it and striding in. He turned his pale eyes on Joyce and raised his scant eyebrows questioningly, indicating that he wanted Joyce to tell him whether her mother had invited him in.

"Who is it?" came through the door in a choking tone.

"It's I, mother!" cried Joyce. "Littlejohn is with me. He's bound to come in and talk with you. Shall I let him?"

"Yes; he'll come anyway," her mother answered.

Joyce nodded to Noah, and he opened the door and preceded her beyond it.

Mrs. Tyrone was seated in a low rocking chair close to a window. Her face was dusty and tear-stained, and she looked fagged and miserable beyond words. The daughter hurried to her, kissed her again and again, and knelt beside her.

"Was it terrible?" she asked, while Littlejohn stood spread-legged and watched them with a look of curiosity on his face.

"Oh, it was awful!" returned the older woman. "I didn't want to come. I'd just arrived back in Spruce from Sacramento. Noah saw me in the street and demanded that I go with him at once. You know I'm not used to riding, Joyce. I haven't been in the saddle very much for two years and over.

"And he made me ride hard to catch up with the last bunch of the drive. Then we had to ride through the cows in order to get past them, and I was frightened nearly to death. It was like a horrible nightmare—that endless sea of tossing horns and switching tails, and the choking dust!

"Then we rode on and on, harder than I have ever ridden before. Our horses are nearly spent. I know I won't be able to move for a week. And all because he took the notion that I must go with him to the ranch then and there!"

"Never mind," returned Joyce grimly. "There's a day of reckoning coming. I have started preparations for it already. Slim Cook leaves to-morrow morning for the Peddler's Crutch. He'll tell Lin everything that has happened on the ranch, and let him know that I want help.

"It's a bad time to take Lin away from the mines and the road building, but—but we just must have his aid. He'll think of some way to help us, even if he can't come. You don't know him as I do, mother. He's simply wonderful!"

The *mestizo's* face was pink as she spoke the last sentence, and Mrs. Tyrone smiled for the first time in two days.

"He was flat on his back," the girl went on, "or he'd have ridden with me to the ranch when I came. I don't know that he's on his feet even now, though his wound wasn't very serious.

"I'm a little surprised, however, that he hasn't done something to help us already. He had an idea of what the situation might be, though he didn't know, of course, that the ranch was willed to Littlejohn. But he knew how much I feared and detested this man.

"He should have sent somebody with me, so long as he couldn't go himself. But I suppose he was too sick from his wound to give the matter proper consideration. He'll help us, though, when he learns the particulars from Slim. Don't worry about that. And now, mother, did you go into the kitchen when you came into the house with Noah?"

"No Joyce. I came straight in here."

"Then you saw nothing peculiar propped up on a chair before the northwest window?"

"No, I saw nothing."

"All right. I'll explain later. Noah wants to talk to you now. Let's get it over with as soon as possible; then you and I will hold a secret conference and I'll tell you all that has happened here since I returned."

She arose to her feet and turned to face

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Littlejohn, who was still watching them with that half-sarcastic, half-curious expression on his face. Noah did not know much about women, but they interested him immeasurably and aroused his curiosity.

"Through?" he asked.

Joyce nodded.

"Then git me a pencil and a piece o' paper that ain't been written on," he ordered. "I wanta talk with yer maw."

"I won't be ordered about like that!" screamed the girl, her anger suddenly getting the better of her.

Then again she remembered that her words were beating against ear drums that were dead, and she clenched her fists in helplessness. If Noah did not have a pencil and paper in his pocket, it was no more than natural for him to request her to supply them, since he was unfamiliar with the domestic arrangements of the house.

But he had not requested them; he had ordered her to get them for him. She was so outraged that she could have struck him in the face. But wishing to get the ordeal over with as speedily as possible, she was helpless to refuse.

Casting a look at him that ought to have caused his eyelids to lower themselves for shame, she left the room for the necessary articles. She interpreted his grin of triumph as she passed him. Noah had sized up the strange situation to a nicety.

He knew, and he realized that the girl knew, that to object to his high-handed methods by writing her feelings on a piece of paper would be utterly ridiculous. He could demand, "Go do that!" and for her to take up pencil and paper and write, "I will not!" and hand it to him, would be intolerably exasperating.

He could snarl his orders at her, and she could put no force behind her refusal to obey them beyond underscoring her written words and affixing an exclamation point. She could show scorn and rebelliousness in her hazel eyes, of course, but he could pretend that he did not see her eyes.

Cold shudders passed over the girl's body as her helplessness came home to her. Her fingernails gnawed into the flesh of her hands; her eyes saw red.

She returned with a tablet and the stub of a pencil. She poked them at him, commanding herself to drop them instantly to the floor if he proved slow in accepting them. But he was not slow.

He seemed to know just how to keep her from enjoying the slightest triumph over him. He reached out and took the articles quickly, then grinned at her again and offered no thanks whatever.

"Oh, Joyce," cried the girl's mother, "are you going to allow him to make a slave of you like that?"

"I—I can't help it—now, mother!" half-sobbed the persecuted girl. "I'll— There's a way out of it, though. His day is now—ours is coming. We must wait and be patient—and—and plan to fix him a-plenty when our day dawns."

Noah stepped close to Mrs. Tyrone, and handed her the tablet and the pencil.

"Feelin' a little tuckered, are ye?" he asked. "Ye don't ride enough, Mrs. Tyrone. This'll do you good!" He chuckled maliciously. "Now write yer answers on that there book," he ordered. "First, then, did ye go into th' kitchen after I run out th' front door?"

Mrs. Tyrone, thinking it unnecessary to write an answer to this question, shook her head.

"Write, I told ye!" howled Littlejohn. "When I tell ye to write, I want ye to do it! Don't shake yer head at me!"

Anita Tyrone's face blanched and she shrank away from him. Then with a trembling hand she wrote "No," and handed him the tablet.

"'No,' eh? Well, why didn't ye say so in th' first place? Ye're sure ye come right in here, are ye?"

"Yes," Mrs. Tyrone wrote dutifully.

Noah read it and wagged his head sagely. "Didn't see nothin' of a funny brown paper thing that looked like a man from th' belly up, did ye?"

Anita Tyrone wrote a negative reply, and gazed at him, wide-eyed, as he removed the tablet from her hand.

He frowned at her short answer, then trained his scowl upon her. Of a sudden he wheeled about and tried to wither Joyce with his terrifying gaze. He jerked his head and rasped at her:

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"Come over here and set on th' floor beside yer maw, like ye was when ye first come in! I want to talk to th' both o' ye at once."

Joyce strode toward him, her boot heels clicking on the puncheon floor. With a quick movement she jerked the tablet from his horny hands. Teeth set, she pointed at the pencil. "Give me that!" she said.

Noah bristled up for an instant, then, seemingly, curiosity as to what she would write overcame him, and he complied. The *mestizo* wrote, so swiftly that the words ran together:

> I will not be ordered about as you have ordered me since you arrived here at the ranch. This property belongs to my mother, and she wants me with her. You are only the foreman of the ranch, and you have no right to be in this house, even. Mother and I will not be dictated to about anything, much less regarding happenings in our home. Get out of here at once, and never come into the house again unless you are asked to.

With her face aflame she looked up from her writing and shoved the tablet at him. His pale eyes, rimmed with red, were studying her quizzically, and on his thin gash of a mouth a sneering smile hovered. Still eying her, he took the tablet from her hands. Not once glancing at it, he tore off the top sheet, crumpled it in his fingers, and tossed it into one corner of the room.

"I guess ye was a little bit sore when ye wrote that, Joyce," he told her. "I'm thinkin' maybe ye'd regret what ye wrote, later, if I was to read it. So I won't look at it at all—see? In other words, I didn't hear what ye said, girl. Ye see, they's no use to fuss and r'ar at me, 'cause I don't have to know what ye're sayin'.

"Ye c'n write whatever ye want to—blister me, ride me to a standstill, cuss me out scand'lous, and I don't have to know that ye're even peeved. Now, do as I say: set down there on th' floor, like jest after ye come in, so's I c'n talk to you and yer maw at th' same time. I like to see ye kneelin' thataway, Joyce. Ye make a picture that I ain't accustomed to seein', and I get a kick outa it.

"Ye'll kneel to Noah Littlejohn like that some day—some day soon, now. Ye're entirely too headstrong for a girl. I'll have to take it outa ye and tame ye down a speck. Kneel down there, now, like I said!"

Joyce's face was tragically white. Her lips trembled, her brain reeled. The breaking point had come sooner than she expected. She swayed drunkenly as she realized the terrible thought that had settled on her mind. Slowly her thumb came from the inside of her carriage belt and her hand began creeping toward the butt of her thirty-eight.

"Tut, tut, kid—don't try that foolish thing!" warned Littlejohn. "You ain't got th' ghost of a chanst with—"

He ceased speaking suddenly and leaped toward her with the quickness of a wild cat. Her gun came out simultaneously, but he had gripped her wrist before she could use it.

He gave it a cruel twist. The gun clattered on the floor as the girl cried out with pain.

Littlejohn's thin lips spread in a viperish grin. His short, blackened teeth were set. His pale eyes had changed to a hard green as they glared into hers.

Then he began twisting, twisting, and the pain drove her halfway to her knees, while one cry after another was wrung from her lips.

"Ye'll do it right now!" he growled at her. "They's no time like th' present to begin yer breakin'. Get down on yer knees, or I'll—"

"Another one o' them insistin' cusses," said a new voice close at hand; and next instant Noah Littlejohn left the floor bodily and banged into a corner of the room, where he fell in a grotesque heap.

He squirmed about, and clawed for his six-gun.

"Hold that, brother," came the same soft voice; and Littlejohn stared into the muzzle of a forty-five in the big hand of Snipe-shooter Quinn.

The other hand of the lank cook reached out and kept Joyce from falling.

"There," he said, "that's better, ma'am! Excuse me, but I thought ye'd tripped yerself and was about to fall. I come to see what ye wanted in th' way o' hot bread for breakfast, ma'am.

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" Muffins er biscuits—she's all th' same to me. I make biscuits best, I reckon, but I never insist where a lady is concerned. Will ye interdooce me to yer fried-eyed friend?"

CHAPTER XIV.

ON TRIAL.

A GREAT feeling of relief swept over Joyce as she disengaged herself from Quinn's supporting arm. This lanky, red-headed man might be an outlaw and as bad as he had been painted; but he had befriended her three times now, and for the moment she trusted him implicitly. Villain he might be, but he seemed to respect women like a true Western gentleman; and he always was on hand when she needed him most.

Littlejohn's peeled face showed white from the darkness of the corner into which the cook had hurled him. He had made no further attempt to draw his weapon from its holster.

He glared from the *mestizo* to the man with the apologetic eyes, then began slowly struggling to his feet. Quinn looked on unconcernedly while the dictator arose and slouched forward.

" My name, friend," said Snipe-shooter Quinn, " is William Quimby. They call me Snipe for short. And yours?"

" He can't hear a word you say," Joyce explained. " He's stone deaf."

" Oh! So this is th' ole gobbler that Slim Cook told me about, eh? And I mind that th' little twisted fella that told me to go ast ye for a job said somethin' about his boss bein' deaf, too. So he's here, eh? And pesterin' ye already! What 'll I do with 'im, ma'am?"

" Nothing," Joyce replied. " He's the manager of this ranch, and can't be discharged. Mother and I are helpless in his hands. But I'll be thankful if—if you'll always happen around as conveniently as you did to-night. This makes three times, Snipe, that you've saved me from embarrassment, to say the least. I won't forget it."

" Do that," returned the cook. " I'd rather ye forget it, ma'am. And now, what about this diamond-back—shall I crown 'im and drag 'im out? Insistin' like that to a lady! He makes me tired."

Littlejohn was standing a few paces off, glaring at the two. On his face was that odd, listening expression that deaf people assume. Never for an instant had the outlaw's eyes left that ghostlike countenance, and in his hand his big single-action weapon continued to cover the foreman.

Joyce was unable to read Noah's expression. It seemed to her that he realized that he was facing a deadly gunman, and at a disadvantage, too. She could read no sign of recognition, but she also knew that Littlejohn was a consummate actor.

" If you can get him out of here for to-night, at least, mother and I will appreciate it," she told the master of the situation.

" I can," said Quinn in the same tone that he might have informed her of his ability to fry liver properly.

" But, first, tell me how you happened to come in here?"

" Didn't I tell ye I wanted to know what sort o' hot bread ye wanted for breakfast?"

" And you heard him—mistreating me?"

" Yes'm. And I come a-runnin'."

" Thank you again," said Joyce feelingly. " I won't forget. And now, if you can relieve us of him for the night—"

" Oh, certainly, ma'am. Makes no difference to me—I get fired in th' mornin', anyway, I guess. But, sayin' I'm to get breakfast, what shall it be—muffins or biscuits, Miss Joyce?"

" Suit yourself about that," she replied, unable to restrain a smile. " And if you remain, the choice of food will be entirely in your hands."

" I thank ye, ma'am. Now, how do I dent this bird so's he'll savvy I'm requestin' 'im to move? I never talked to a deaf person. I don't know how to make 'em savvy. Do I write on a piece o' paper, 'Beat it, brother, or I'll bean ye,' or jest nestle my fist in th' collar of his shirt and give 'im th' toe of my boot?"

Here indeed was a problem, for Littlejohn still stood waiting patiently for some

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one to convey a thought to him; but nevertheless with wrath in his peculiar eyes. An interruption, however, saved Joyce and the skinny cook from efforts to solve it. There came a loud knocking at the outside door of the living room.

"There!" said Quinn. "I reckon some o' them new boys, or else Slim Cook, has found out somebody's jest come to th' rancho, and are investigatin'. Seen th' horses, likely. Will ye go look into it, ma'am?"

Promptly the girl left her mother's room, crossed the large living room, and approached the front door, which still stood ajar. A man with a lantern appeared just beyond the entrance. He was Scarface Hyde.

"Evenin'," he greeted her. "I heard hosses trompin' at th' house, and come over to see if Littlejohn had got in. I found th' hosses, so where's th' boss?"

"He's in here," Joyce returned, her hazel eyes ablaze over the insolence in his tones.

"Is he comin' to th' bunk house? Find out if he wants one o' th' boys to git th' *caballos* an' put 'em up. What's he doin'?"

"Just at present," Joyce replied, unable to conceal a note of triumph, "he's looking into the muzzle of Snipe Quimby's six. I think Noah would like to see you and have you take him away. Come on in."

"What's that? Ye say—"

"You heard me perfectly," and she turned her back on him. "Come and get him."

With a puzzled expression on his swarthy face, the man with the long scar on his jaw followed the girl across the living room, mumbling to himself. She preceded him through the door of her mother's room, where the cook and Noah still faced each other.

"Here he is," she announced, standing back for Scarface to enter. "I'll get you a pencil and paper. Write what you can on it to make Noah leave the house. If you can't make him go, I'll ask Snipe to take him."

For a moment or two the mean little eyes of Scarface, now round and beady with surprise, surveyed his lord and master and the complacent man who held the six-gun.

"What's th' grand idear?" he presently asked of Snipe.

"Little notion of my own, brother, to keep folks from insistin' where a lady's concerned," returned the cook. "Is this yours?" He waved his gun toward Noah. "If so, remove yer property, please. These here ladies wants to go to bed, and this here incumbrance is messin' up th' premises."

Joyce had recovered the pencil and the tablet. She thrust them into Scarface's hands. "Get him out of here," she ordered.

His puzzled eyes glanced from her to the tablet, then he wet the pencil point with his tongue and began laboriously to write. Soon he stepped to the side of the silent Noah and handed him the pad. Noah took it and read.

Slowly, as he finished, he raised his head; and there was a new light in his eyes as they studied Quinn—a look of intense interest and curiosity. Then he turned to his satellite.

"All right," he said, "I'll go."

And without further ado he tramped out in the wake of the scarfaced cowhand.

"That's that," said the outlaw. "And now, ma'am, good night. Th' same to you, ma'am," and he bowed to the white-faced mother.

"Thank you. Good night," from Joyce.

Slouchily, loose-jointedly, with his feet making but little noise, the red-headed cook left the house and softly closed the door behind him.

"What a contradiction of a man!" cried the girl, as she heard the closing of the door. "Noah knows him now, or else he wouldn't have gone so mildly on the advice of Scarface. And if the cook remains, I'll know about where we stand."

Half an hour afterward Joyce and her mother went to bed; and while they slept strange proceedings were taking place in the bunk house.

They began when Littlejohn and Scarface clanked in, interrupting the four new cowhands at a game of poker. Slim Cook lay on his bunk, fully dressed, but feigning sleep.

Quinn was the only man missing of those

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who worked on Tyrone Ranch, for at the time he was walking slowly from the house, having left it after Scarface and Noah had taken themselves away. He seemed in no hurry to join the others, but lazed along and watched the rising moon.

The four poker players looked up quickly as Scarface came in. They switched their benches about as Littlejohn loomed up in his wake, and knowing looks passed among them.

" Here's Noah, fellas," was Scarface's introduction of the newcomer. " Le'me at that table, and somebody get me somethin' to write with. I wanta let 'im know about this Quinn before th' fella gets here. Make it snappy! Get outa th' way, Scorpion!"

The cowhands scraped their seats back from the table and arose. Several envelopes and scraps of paper were found, to which collection was added a pencil. The men lined themselves against the walls and looked on curiously while Scarface and Littlejohn seated themselves and prepared for the clumsy transmittal of their thoughts.

Scarface moistened the pencil with his tongue and began to write. But before he had proceeded very far a man stepped from the wall and, touching his shoulder, whispered something in his ear.

Hyde looked up quickly and frowned toward the bunk on which lay Slim Cook. Then he wrote a brief sentence and passed the envelope on which it was written to Littlejohn.

Noah read it, glared toward the prone cowpuncher, and got to his feet.

" Cook," he rasped, " beat it outa here. You're fired, fella. Tyrone Ranch won't need ye any longer. Pack yer warbag and find some place else to sleep to-night—and hit th' trail in th' mornin'."

Slim rose on an elbow. " Got some pay comin', ain't I?" he wanted to know.

Noah seemed to have read his lips, for he took from his hip pocket a generous roll of bills. " Name it!" he demanded.

Slim pursed his lips and figured mentally. " Fifty-seven dollars, I make it," he said.

Noah looked toward Scarface, who wrote the amount and showed it to him.

The dictator then peeled off bills and tossed them on the table beside the smelly glass coal-oil lamp and the scattered cards and poker chips.

" Grab it and run," he commanded.

Slim got out of bed, scraped together his few belongings, hitched up his cartridge belt, and, with a grin of half-embarrassment, picked up the bills and left the bunk house.

" Watch where he goes, Scorpion," said Scarface to the man who stood beside him. " He'll sleep in th' hay, likely. Don't come back till ye see 'im fully settled for th' night."

Removing his jingling spurs so that he might follow the departing man noiselessly, the fellow called Scorpion, a chunky, dark-complexioned man, stole out in the *vaquero's* wake.

Silence settled down again while Scarface wrote laboriously, covering the faces and backs of the three envelopes. Noah leaned back and watched him out of his peculiar bloodhound eyes, his peeled-looking face revealing a severe curiosity.

At last the writing was pushed toward him, and the dictator of Tyrone Ranch began to read. At the same time his right-hand man was writing more information on other scraps of paper.

Nearly half an hour was consumed in this way, Scarface writing and passing his work to his boss, Littlejohn reading avidly. But finally the squat man leaned back and shoved over his final effort, and now his beady, insolent little eyes remained fixed expectantly on Noah's face.

Littlejohn looked up.

" Where is this fella now?" he asked.

Hyde jerked his head toward the door and shrugged.

" Send somebody out to find 'im,'" came the order.

But just then the door opened and the lanky cook slouched in, seated himself on a bunk, shoved his big gun into his lap, and glanced apologetically about the smoky room amid a silence that was strained.

" Talk to 'im, Scarface," Noah commanded. " Thunderation! I wish I could hear! Go on—do th' best ye can. And then write all about it for me."

Scarface turned his chair sidewise so that he was facing the newcomer.

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"Well, friend," he ventured, "how're ye stackin' up by now?"

"Tolerable," answered the cook.

"And so ye're really Snipe-Shooter Quinn, are ye?"

"That's what one o' yer hands remarked," drawled the outlaw.

"I hear ye're one o' th' best shots with a six-gun or a Winchester west o' th' Mississippi River," continued Hyde.

"I got certain medals," admitted the cook. "Most of 'em's gold."

"I reckon that was before ye took to—to"—Scarface searched his mind for appropriate words—"before ye took to investigatin' dredger company's profits," he finished, quite proud of his effort.

"Yes, but I keep in practice," returned the other. "At th' beginnin' o' th' war they had me trainin' kid soldiers how to shoot in a certain military post in Texas. But they didn't know I was Quinn."

"Didn't they give ye that name—Snipe-Shooter—because a snipe is one o' th' hardest birds to bring down when he's on th' wing?"

"I reckon so," Quinn drawled disinterestedly. "But I ain't using that name here. I'm Snipe Quimby while I'm on Tyrone Ranch."

"All right, Snipe—we'll all try to remember that," said Scarface with a grin. "And I want ye to understand that they ain't gonta be no hard feelin's between you and me on account o' that little play in th' kitchen this evenin'.

"If I'd 'a' known ye was th' famous Quinn I'd never dived for my cannon when ye turned yer back. And I'd 'a' handed ye Noah's note pronto, too. I didn't understand, ye see. Now, though, I guess I do. I'll understand better, maybe, if ye'll tell me how ye happened to drift out to Tyrone Ranch. D'ye mind relievin' yerself?"

"Well, seein' ye know me, I might as well admit that I'm hidin' out for th' present," returned the cook. "Looked to me like Tyrone Ranch, 'way up here between th' Pipe-Organ and th' Stranger, might make a good nook for a lonely man like me, that didn't wanta mingle with his fellamen for a spell. So hearin' men was needed out here, I hit up th' owner's daughter for a job."

"Ah-ha! Now we're gettin' down to tacks. Tell me, if ye're a mind to, how ye heard hands was needed at Tyrone Ranch."

"I was ridin' through Spruce on a freight train, hidin' in a boxcar," Quinn replied. "There was a little deal pulled off somewhere near th' summit not long before—th' express office in the depot of a certain burg had been robbed, I b'lieve. I thought maybe they might think I done it, because I happened to be around there at th' time.

"So, my horse havin' been killed, I piled my saddle and bridle into an empty boxcar when nobody was lookin', and rode down to Spruce. Didn't know it was Spruce, though, until th' con' found me and fired me out. Then settin' there with my saddle and bridle on th' platform at Spruce, waitin' for a chance to get down th' line, I heard about this openin'. And I looked up Miss Joyce Larue and hit her for a job. Got it. That's all."

"Who was it told ye th' ranch was needin' hands?" asked Scarface.

"Stranger to me. Little sawed-off fella with a twisted face and crooked eyes."

Hyde studied the lean face of the outlaw for a little, then leaned over the table and penciled this, which he passed to Littlejohn:

> He says a little fella with a twisted face and crooked eyes told him he could get a job from Joyce Larue. Who could that be?

Noah read it and glanced at Quinn.

"Did he have a kinda puckered mouth, and was he about five feet three, and did his hat look like th' top of a toadstool on a pea?" he asked.

Snipe-shooter grinned and nodded.

"Small John Copper, all right," muttered Noah. "Go on, Scarface. Find out somethin' more. What'd Small John say?"

Snipe-shooter answered the question direct.

"He told me about Littlejohn," he said, "and that he was gonta be boss o' Tyrone Ranch as soon as a certain will was read. He said this Littlejohn was wantin' to get together a bunch o' fellas that was—well, wasn't too particular, we'll put it. What ye might call a rough-and-ready bunch. He said I'd like it out here. That's about all. So here I am, gents—here I am."

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Scarface wrote this new information for Noah, who, when he had read it, burst forth with:

"Where'd Small John Copper learn all that, I wanta know? Where'd *he* learn it, I'm astin'!"

Snipe shook his head. "He didn't say," he told Scarface.

Scarface wrote:

> Didn't you tell Small John you would be needing men?

"Certainly I did!" growled Noah. "That is, I reckon I did. I don't remember. But I didn't tell 'im to hire 'em for me. I left that to you, Scarface. And I told Small John to tell you th' same, when he'd sneak to me now and then while I was laid up at Th' Crutch. All he was to do was to act as messenger between me and th' outside, and let me know what was goin' on at th' ranch."

Scarface wrote the following and passed it to the dictator:

> Don't you think that maybe Small John Copper knew this fella here and thought he'd be a good man for you to have, him knowing just what you had in mind?

"Maybe so—maybe so," Noah replied. "If he done that, I'm tickled. But I'll be damned if I know how he heard about th' will and everythin'."

"Oh, well, maybe he c'n explain when he comes," said Scarface; then, remembering that Noah could not hear him, repeated the sentence on paper. And he added this to it:

> I think this fellow here is all right and that we will be glad to have him. What do you say we make friends with him awhile and test him out? We need not let him know everything that you got in mind till we are sure he will be with us solid. Let's just forget it for awhile, let him do the cooking, and wait till Small John comes. Then if you say so, I'll tell Snipe-Shooter what we've got in mind, and ask him if he wants to come in on it.

To which Noah Littlejohn answered: "All right."

Scarface Hyde turned to Quimby with a friendly grin.

"You won't get fired, Snipe," he promised. "Just stick around awhile and cook for th' bunch, if you want to, until Small John Copper comes to th' ranch—which will be in a few days. Then maybe we can come to an understandin' about your plays to-night concernin' that there girl."

"I c'n let ye understand that right now," returned the outlaw. "I may be a rough one, and all that, but th' lady hired me, and I'm workin' for her. Furthermore, I don't like to see any lady abused. I know that what may take place around here maybe will interest me a lot, but abusin' a lady won't. I'm jest naturally thataway, and I can't help it."

"But she don't know ye're Snipe-Shooter Quinn, does she?" asked Hyde.

"I hope not," returned the outlaw. "I'm particular about who I tell that to."

"Thanks," said Scarface. "We take that as a compliment, old-timer."

"Help yerselves," drawled the lanky cook.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RECRUIT.

THE day following the eventful evening on which Noah Littlejohn reached Tyrone Ranch saw the remainder of the cattle come bellowing in. And four more cow-punchers were added to the five already in Noah Littlejohn's employ, which made four more that Snipe Quimby must cook for.

Also, this day witnessed the departure of Slim Cook for the upper reaches of the Pipe-Organ and the Peddler's Crutch, carrying a message of importance from Joyce Larue to Lin Columbia. Joyce had made it a point to be out of sight of the house when he rode off, so that Littlejohn and his gang might not suspect that he was to carry a message for her to the Peddler's Crutch.

But just the same, a man left the group that was working with the cattle fifteen minutes after Slim Cook had departed. He followed the discharged *vaquero* into the chaparral, trailed him up toward Cutthroat Pass, and then returned to report to Little-

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john that Slim was not headed for Spruce, but was making for that vast wilderness country that bounded Tyrone Ranch on the west. The ghost-faced Noah wagged his head and his hard mouth became a slit.

"Get that fella if he shows up around here agin," was his brief order to the congregated members of his band.

Noah and Scarface Hyde were not a little puzzled at the failure of Small John Copper to put in his appearance when the last of the cattle had been driven in. The punchers handling these bunches reported that they had not seen him.

The dictator knew that, long before, Small John must have completed the tasks that he had set for him. He had ordered the twisted little puncher to help drive in the last of the cattle and report at headquarters.

"I'll fix *him!*" he muttered to Scarface. "Drunk agin, I reckon. I'll teach 'im."

But four days passed over Tyrone Ranch and Small John was still at large.

Noah had made inquiry here and there concerning the brown silhouette of the head and shoulders of a man which he had found propped up on a chair on his return to the ranch. Nobody whom he questioned could give him an answer; all professed complete ignorance of the existence of such a thing.

"I wish I'd taken th' time to pump that ornery Slim Cook before I drove him off," he grumbled. "Confound me, what was I thinkin' about, anyway? There's somethin' mighty mysterious about that there thing, fellas.

"But th' devil of it is, what become o' that there toy? Who sneaked her outa th' house, and why? Couldn't 'a' been Slim ner Joyce. And I'm sure Miss Tyrone didn't make her disappear. So th' only answer is Snipe-Shooter Quinn. What about that bird anyway, Scarface?"

It was the morning of the fourth day after Slim Cook's departure, and six of the eleven men of Tyrone Ranch were congregated in the bunk house. The other five were in the timber with the cattle. The lanky cook with the melancholy eyes was not present: doubtless he had not yet completed his morning tasks in the ranch-house kitchen.

In answer to his boss's question, Scarface wrote the following:

> If that brown paper thing disappeared like you say, I'm thinking that Snipe-Shooter must have had something to do with it. I know that he was not in the bunk house when you come. And all five of us fellows was. Snipe-Shooter had come to the bunk house from the kitchen and called Slim Cook outside. I saw Slim going toward the house, and supposed the girl had told the cook to send him to her. Then Snipe-Shooter went toward the stables, and I did not see him any more until after you come. So if there was nobody else on the ranch but the ones I have mentioned, it must have been Snipe-Shooter that took the thing away.

Noah pondered long over Scarface Hyde's communication. "I don't like it," he said moodily at last. "There's somethin' mighty funny about this Quinn. As ye say, Scarface, nobody else but him could 'a' took that thing outa th' window. That means he didn't want me to find it and look it over.

"Now what's th' grand idea? Is he workin' ag'in' us? Is he gonta fight fer Joyce to keep me from gettin' this ranch? Has he turned detective, and does he mean to watch us fellas and find out what we got in mind?

"Scarface, you write an outline o' th' whole deal as ye see it. You met this bird before I did, and maybe you c'n get a better line on 'im than I have. What's he want, anyway?"

Scarface wrote laboriously, and presently passed the result across the table to the dictator. Noah read:

> I think it is just like he hinted. He met up with Copper. Small John, of course, knew we was getting together a bunch of boys who got the nerve to pull off certain little deals we got in mind. He knows this Snipe-Shooter. Small John had drifted about a lot in the West, and he knows a lot of regular fellows. So he thinks he will let Quinn in on this deal, believing that you will be glad to have such a man on the ranch, considering what we are going to pull off when we get through with the pressing work here.
>
> So Small John gives Snipe-Shooter a hint as to what is in the wind and tells him to ask the girl for a job. Maybe they plan together to fool her into thinking Snipe-Shooter is her friend.
>
> Maybe he was trying to make her think

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so when he made me hand over your note at the supper table. The same when he pitched you into a corner and threw down on you in Mrs. Tyrone's room. I am thinking all that was done to make the girl think he is with her.

And then again, maybe it is just as he says. That he won't stand for anybody getting rough with a woman, no matter if he is a man that is wanted by a dozen sheriffs. You better not handle the girl too rough, Noah.

That is all I can say about Snipe-Shooter Quinn. He is a funny duck, to say the least. Whether he is with us or against us, I cannot say. But the disappearance of that dummy looks strange. And where did the thing come from, anyway?

Noah looked up from his reading.

"You don't get us anywhere," he growled. "Send fer this fella, and le's have an understandin' to-day. If Small John would only show up, we might know where we stand. But he don't, so le's feel out this here Quinn and make him lay his cards on th' table.

"If he ain't with us, I want him to beat it offen th' ranch to-morrow. And he ain't in any position to squeal on us if we let him know jest what we're gonta do.

"*He'd* look fine goin' to a sheriff and tellin' 'im there's a rough bunch that needs watchin' on Tyrone Ranch, wouldn't he? Send somebody after 'im right now, Scarface; and you go take a ride with this bird and get th' dope on 'im."

So Scarface sent Scorpion O'Connor to the kitchen after the notorious gunman with the brooding eyes.

Just as Scorpion stepped out of the door of the bunk house there came a rapid series of revolver shots from close at hand.

"What th' devil!" and Scarface bounded to his feet and leaped outside, the others crowding the door behind him.

Over at the ranch house, standing beside the kitchen door, was the man they had been talking about. He was blowing the smoke from the barrel of his immense wooden-handled six-gun preparatory to reloading the emptied chambers.

"What th' dickens is he shootin' at?" muttered Hyde. "Wait a minute—don't make a move, boys! He's loadin' up agin."

They watched while the lanky cook deliberately reloaded his revolver and stood holding it at arm's length by his side, looking this way and that.

Then suddenly the gun came up again and six more rapid shots awoke the echoes in the surrounding hills. A tin can, which had lain at some distance from the kitchen door, went bounding through the grass as if it were alive.

"Great guns, look at that!" marveled a puncher. "I see 'im hit that bouncin' can three times. I'm gonta have a look at it when he ain't about."

"Jest practicin', I guess," decided Scarface. "Go on and get 'im, Scorpion. Wonder if he pulls them stunts often? He worries me, that ole dromedary!"

The men went into the bunk house once more, and a short time afterward Quinn, tall, lank, melancholy-looking, slipped in behind the messenger and seated himself on a stool, under a battery of eyes. He rolled and lighted a brown-paper cigarette, and carried his smoke and the lighted match to his lips at one and the same time, Mexican style.

"I hear ye wanta see me," he said to Scarface, then puffed in silence and gloomily surveyed the group of men.

Hyde cleared his throat and turned about from the table. The twitching and whitening of the scar that extended from his mouth to the lobe of his ear showed his mental strain.

"Snipe," he began bluntly at last, "we've decided that it's time for a showdown. We want to know where we stand with you, and how you stand with Joyce Larue. In other words, cowboy, we're gonta unburden ourselves, and we'd like it plenty if you'll do th' same."

"Shoot!" offered Quinn.

"Then come on to th' stables with me, and we'll saddle up and have a ride, so's we c'n talk without everybody listenin'."

"Suits me," agreed the cook, and together they walked to the corrals and threw the saddles on a couple of horses.

"In th' first place," Hyde plunged in as they rode away into the north, "we reckon ye know that this here rancho is as good as Littlejohn's, don't ye? Th' will of Tyrone made 'im manager o' this prop'ty for a year after Black Ozias's death. And a

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manager c'n do about what he wants to with th' thing he's managin', can't he?"

Quinn nodded noncommittally and crooked a leg about his saddlehorn.

"This is a valuable piece o' prop'ty," Scarface continued. "Come fall, there'll be three thousan' head o' beef stock to be marketed. Noah allows to clean up on that deal 'way over a hundred thousan' dollars. That's a nice piece o' money, Snipe."

"A considerable pile," admitted the outlaw. "Does th' owner get it?"

"Well, hardly," replied Scarface, with a grin. "Some of it, maybe, but not too much. Women folks are reckless with money when they get more'n's good for 'em."

"Uh-huh."

"Ye see, Snipe, th' sellin' o' th' beef stock will be in th' hands of Mis' Tyrone's attorney, who lives at th' county seat, Chaparral. He handles all of her business, I understand. He's pretty fond o' Noah Littlejohn."

"What's that bird's name?" asked the cook.

"Frank Jennings," was the reply.

"How're they gonta work it?"

"Jest before th' drive o' beef stock to market," said Hyde, "there's gonta be a big stampede over on th' banks o' th' Pipe-Organ. A lotta them cows is gonta be shoved by th' others over a steep cliff into th' river. So they won't be so many to drive out—understand me?"

"I reckon I do," replied the outlaw. "Ye mean that Mis' Tyrone and her daughter will *think* they lost a lot o' beef critters, while th' truth of it will be that this lawyer will sell and collect for th' whole shootin' match."

"Jest about that," returned the scar-faced man.

"I met that lawyer at Spruce," said Snipe. "He looks like he'd be a handy man in a deal like that."

"You met 'im!"

"Sure—at th' office o' th' justice o' th' peace. Him and me was there to witness Mis' Tyrone's signature to her will."

"What's that?"

"Didn't ye hear me?" drawled Snipe.

"And did ye witness 'er, brother?"

"I did—*he* didn't. He got to insistin', and I wrung his neck a little so that he decided to get somebody else to witness in his place."

"Listen, Snipe," said Scarface earnestly; "did ye notice who Mis' Tyrone willed the ranch to?"

"No, I didn't," replied the cook. "I jest signed my name and let her go at that."

"Great guns, but I wish ye'd found that out, man! I must tell Littlejohn about that right away. He'll be int'rested. I'm sure he ain't seen Jennings since he come down from th' Peddler's Crutch."

"Why does Littlejohn wanta know who Mis' Tyrone willed th' ranch to?" asked Snipe innocently.

"Well, maybe ye'll know more about that later," was the only answer that his companion vouchsafed.

They rode their horses at a walk in silence for a time, with Scarface thinking deeply. Then suddenly he swung toward the cook.

"Listen," he said; "I'm gonta ast ye a man-to-man question, Snipe. What're ye doin' here, anyway?"

"Cookin', jest now," replied the other.

"Come on! Le's quit monkeyin'! Did Small John tell ye anythin' about what Littlejohn's got in mind?"

"Maybe so, and maybe not," evaded the outlaw. "Suppose you loosen up and tell me."

Scarface pondered half a minute before he spoke again.

"Did ye ever hear o' Black Ozias, who owned Tyrone Ranch?" he asked.

"Slightly."

"Ye heard, then, about th' gang o' punchers he got together to turn a certain little trick?"

"Yep."

"Ye know he failed, then. Ye know Littlejohn was his right-hand man. Ye know Ozias got killed in th' deal. Ye know, too, likely, that all o' his gang had to drift outa th' country. Noah stuck, and later Copper sneaked back in and got in touch with him while he was laid up at th' Peddler's Crutch. Ye know all that?"

"Jest about."

"All right, then. Littlejohn now means

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to organize another gang and continue th' good work that Ozias had to drop. He's got 'em together now. A bunch o' rough-and-ready boys that don't give a whoop for nothin'. Noah'd like to have you join us. It 'll be worth your while, Snipe."

" What's in it?"

" A fortune for all of us. The new railroad's buildin' through this country. Frank Jennings has information that, before so very long, th' assistant chief engineer is gonta establish his headquarters at th' Peddler's Crutch, which is a divide in th' Stranger Mountains.

" Every month there'll be a wad o' money carried to his camp to pay off th' two thousan' or more stiffs that are workin' on th' grade. We're gonta take that money away from 'em as long as they're fool enough to send it out."

" Sounds good," admitted the cook, rolling another cigarette.

" There's four overland express trains a day runnin' through Spruce and Porcupine," continued Scarface. " They carry valuable mail and express—money sometimes, of course. It's goin' to be pretty easy meat."

" Still good," Quinn admitted.

" We'll make th' ranch headquarters," said Scarface. " We'll operate from here. We'll clean up a fortune apiece, then scatter. And in th' meantime Littlejohn is gonta get every cent he can outa Tyrone Ranch. But that depends on who Mis' Tyrone willed th' ranch to th' other day. If she willed it to her daughter, then maybe Noah will change his mind. Ye see, Noah means to marry Joyce. So, of course, if th' ranch is willed to her, who's gonta be his wife, he may change his plans regardin' this prop'ty."

" S'pose th' girl don't wanta marry 'im," Quinn suggested.

" Noah's got a way to make her," returned the other. " Ye might not think it to look at 'im, but he sure is clever, that bird."

" Supposin', then, that Mis' Tyrone has willed th' rancho to her daughter," said the outlaw. " In that case, it would be mighty handy for Noah if th' old lady would die, wouldn't it? That is, seein' he's gonta marry th' girl? He wouldn't wanta ruin th' ranch then, would he—*his own ranch?*"

" That's fer Noah to decide," replied the squat man. " What I rode out here to ast ye is this: do ye want any part of it in yours?"

" Well, I might take a chance—seein' I'm practically loafin' right now."

" We'll be proud to have ye with us," Scarface declared. " It's been hard to get ye to say jest where ye stand, but I reckon ye had yer reasons fer bein' cautious. But didn't Copper give ye to understand what ye might expect to find out here?"

" Sure did," returned the cook.

" Then, why didn't ye make yerself known and lay off that monkey stuff with me in th' kitchen th' first night we met?"

" I was jest feelin' about," the cook made answer. " Maybe I was waitin' fer Copper to show up and explain about me. And in th' meantime I made myself strong with th' girl. I think it all worked out fine."

" It sure did—lookin' at th' matter thataway. I guess ye're all right and will stick with us. Noah'll be glad to have ye. I think he'll have a little job fer ye to do right away—somethin' that th' rest of us don't know much about."

" What's that?"

" Can ye crack a safe?"

" Might—if I tried right hard."

Scarface grinned knowingly. " I guess it wouldn't bother ye much. I'll speak to Noah about it right away."

" They's jest one little thing I'd like to say before we close this here pleasant little conference," said the outlaw.

" Shoot!" invited Scarface.

" Don't pester th' girl or her mother personally," warned the cook. " Rob 'em if ye can, but don't harm 'em. I held up a lotta people in my time, and done all sorts o' funny tricks with a gun, but no woman can say I ever bothered her or made her uncomfortable in the least. I don't believe in that. Tell yer boss to lay off that stuff if he wants me with 'im."

" All right, I'll tell 'im. You got a right to demand somethin', I reckon. Sometimes Noah does get a little too— Great Scott! What's that funny roarin' noise?"

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Both men sat listening, then simultaneously tilted back their heads.

"You may shoot me if it ain't an airplane!" cried Hyde.

"And she's comin' a-ramblin' straight over Tyrone Ranch!" added Quinn.

"Th' new fire patrol, I'll bet!" said Scarface. "I heard th' forest service was gonta put on airplanes with fire scouts to run 'em. First thing like that I ever see in this country!"

"He's sure a-whoopin' it up!" was Quinn's observation.

CHAPTER XVI.

THREE RED LIGHTS.

JOYCE also saw the airplane from her bedroom window. Wonderingly, she watched it as it soared into the northwest, described a wide circle, and came silently volplaning back, sailing very low and passing directly over the house.

It was so low, in fact, that she saw the head and shoulders of a man as he leaned out and looked down at her. He wore an aviator's helmet, however, and goblin-like goggles were over his eyes, so that his face was entirely indistinguishable. The motor began to hum again, and then the machine, rising gradually, soared away into the south and disappeared behind a rack of filmy clouds.

An hour later she saw it appear once more, and this time it remained high in the air and circled over the ranch twice before it finally disappeared from sight again.

While she was looking up at it a familiar voice addressed her, and she shuddered at the sound of it. It belonged to Noah Littlejohn, and he had stepped before the window and stood there grinning at her uncharitably.

A short time before, just prior to the second appearance of the plane, the girl had seen Scarface and Quinn ride into one of the corrals and unsaddle their ponies. She had wondered at their riding together, and had prepared herself for some new development. Now that Littlejohn had come to her, apparently with some business matter in mind, she was on her guard instantaneously.

"Purty day, Joyce," were the words that had startled her.

She nodded, lips set.

"They's a little matter I wanted to talk to ye about," went on the deaf man. "Seein' as she concerns th' work in th' house, I thought I'd better put her up to you.

"This here cook ye got—what's his name?—Snipe Quimby—he says ye allowed to git him a Chinese helper for th' kitchen work. They's eleven men to feed here now; and, while that aint an awful bunch this here cook thinks he needs some help.

"He's a handy man on a horse, I hear, and time may come when we'll wanta use 'im quick workin' with th' cows. Then a second man in th' kitchen 'll come in handy. What d'ye think about such an arrangement, Joyce?"

His tones were disarming, and, although she resented his use of her given name, she was led to believe that, for once at least, he was earnestly consulting her about the running of the ranch.

He had passed her a small pad and a pencil, and she readily wrote:

> Yes, in order to get Snipe to consent to cook for us, I promised him a helper. He doesn't care for the work, and I am anxious to make things as pleasant for him as possible. I think that you ought to send some one outside hunting for a second cook and general kitchen flunky.

"My idee exactly," said Noah, as he finished reading her opinion. "I don't know if we c'n git a chink or not, but we c'n git somebody. I think I'll send Snipe in 'imself lookin' fer a man. Could you and yer mother tend to th' kitchen work while he's gone?"

Joyce did not like the look in his sky-colored eyes. There was something back of this, she believed. Since he came to the rancho he had never before consulted her about anything. He had gone ahead and done as he pleased.

Now his tones were entirely too smooth, and his manner too suave. It would have been more like the Noah Littlejohn that she thought she knew to *order* her and her

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mother to work in Snipe's place during his absence. She wrote on the pad:

Why can't some one else go out and attend to that?

"Snipe says he knows a fella somewhere in this country that's an ole pal o' his," was Littlejohn's ready explanation. "He'd like to get this bird, if he can. And th' fella's more likely to be persuaded to come if Snipe goes after 'im personally.

"I think we better give in to his little whim, 'cause he's a rattlin' good ranch cook. Ye'll admit that yerself, Joyce. So if yer maw and you c'n manage to do th' work fer a few days, we'il send Snipe fer a horseback ride."

Joyce had told herself that she would not cook one morsel of food for these ruffians that Littlejohn had brought together on Tyrone Ranch. But, pondering the matter now, she considered it inadvisable to show too much suspicion.

There was something new in the wind, she knew full well. She could not stop its progress, anyway. The best thing that she could do, she reasoned, was to seem to be satisfied with Noah's plan, in order to find out what was really afoot and be prepared to meet it.

"All right," she wrote. "Mother and I will do the work for a few days. Send Snipe in to-morrow morning, if you think best—or even this afternoon."

"We'll start 'im right after dinner," Noah returned, and swung away from the window.

Joyce sat brooding over this new development. She was surprised and apprehensive over seeing the cook ride to the corrals in company with Scarface Hyde. Where had they been? What had they been doing together?

It was quite apparent, now, that Littlejohn and his gang had accepted Snipe as one of them. Nothing whatever had been said about discharging the new cook, and he had been faithfully filling his duties in the kitchen ever since Noah's appearance at the ranch. The cook's ride with Scarface that day clinched the belief in the *mestizo's* mind that, whatever was afoot, Quinn had become part and parcel of it.

And now why was he being sent over the long trail in search of a helper, when any one of Noah's hirelings could have attended to this business as well? Joyce had no trust in the outlaw whatever now. And this meant that she had not one friend, aside from her helpless mother, on Tyrone Ranch.

Why had she heard nothing from Linneus Columbia? She counted the days since the departure for the Peddler's Crutch of her messenger. Slim had been gone four days. Riding hard, he ought to have been able to make The Crutch the second day. So it was time for his reappearance with a message from Lin.

Perhaps, though, he would come that night. They had arranged to meet at the sprawling oak, in whose vicinity they had contemplated holding a conference on the night that Littlejohn had come. She had been there until ten o'clock the night before, but he had not appeared.

She would go again to-night, and to-morrow night, and every night until he came to her. She was nervous and wretched and longing for an encouraging word from Lin.

The morning passed and noon arrived. The men trooped in for dinner when Quinn summoned them with blasts on the cow's horn. They came from various parts of the ranch, and it seemed to the girl that all of them who were at headquarters had been working at something.

Noah Littlejohn was keeping up the ranch work, anyway; she had no complaint to make along that line. But, then, why shouldn't he? He considered the property as good as his, she understood. Why should he neglect such a valuable asset as Tyrone Ranch?

After the six cow-punchers, including Littlejohn had eaten in the commodious kitchen and filed out again, the mysterious cook tapped lightly on the door of Joyce's room.

"Dinner's waitin' fer you and yer maw, ma'am," he announced.

"All right—thanks, Snipe," she responded, and went to her mother's room when she heard him shuffling back to the kitchen.

A short time afterward mother and daughter were seated at one end of the long

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oilcloth-covered table, and the silent cook with the morose eyes was serving them.

"Littlejohn tells me that you are going to start for Spruce this afternoon in search of a helper, Snipe," ventured the girl.

"Yes'm—that's his idee," he replied.

"I'm glad that you're doing this," Joyce kept on. "I know you must dislike kitchen work, being an outdoor man. When you get your helper you'll have a great deal of time to follow your own inclinations in the afternoons, I imagine. I guess you like the feel of the saddle as well as I do. I saw you returning from a little ride this morning. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Plenty," was the brief response.

"I looked out the window this morning when you fired your six twelve times, too. You frightened me. Later, after you had gone into the bunk house, I went out and looked at the cans you had shot at."

"Did ye, ma'am? I thought I hit th' first one once."

"You hit one can six times," she replied, "the other one five times. You must have hit the second one four times while it was rolling through the grass."

"Well! Is that so, ma'am? I used to be a fairly good shot, but I'm terribly out o' practice! Wanta get me some more ca'tridges while I'm gone after this helper. I'm short on ammunition right now. I like to plunk a dozen or more every day to keep in shape."

"You're a wonderful shot, and you know it," said Joyce. "Practice all you want to, but I wish you wouldn't be quite so sudden about it. Mother and I are nervous these days."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. I'll remember that."

"Did you see the airplane while you were riding with Hyde to-day?" the girl asked cautiously.

"Yes'm. She rambled right over us once. Scarface was with me, ma'am."

"Yes, I saw you both riding in just after the plane disappeared the first time. You and Scarface have settled your little difficulty?"

"Oh, yes'm—that all blowed over. And Littlejohn and me are gettin' along fine now. They all like my cookin', if ye'll excuse me fer seemin' to boast; so they was willin' to smooth things over in order to get me to stay. Ye might say, Miss Joyce, that good biscuits are mightier than th' sword—sometimes.

"But I made 'em promise to let you and yer mother alone after this—especially while I'm gone fer my helper. If anybody pesters ye or gets to insistin' too hard, let me know when I get back, ma'am."

"I will, Snipe—thank you."

Nothing more passed between them, and presently Joyce and her mother left the table. Shortly afterward, through one of the living room windows, Joyce saw Snipe riding away on Punishment toward the entrance to the chaparral-lined trail to Spruce.

Joyce and her mother prepared supper for the men that night, serving them silently while they ate. The men, too, were uncommunicative among themselves, and Hyde's attempt to start a conversation proved fruitless. Furtive glances followed the two women as they moved about.

When the dishes were washed and put away, and the kitchen cleaned, Joyce and her mother retired to the living room. Here they read and played cribbage until half past nine o'clock, when Mrs. Tyrone went to bed.

Ten minutes afterward Joyce entered her own room. She sat for a time with the lamp burning, thinking deeply. Then she extinguished the light, waited a short time, and crawled through the window into the cool mountain night.

Cautiously, with her eyes on the lighted windows of the bunk house, she slipped along through the darkness, climbed over the front gate, and made for the old oak at whose base she had arranged to meet Slim Cook.

There was nobody about when she reached it, and she drew her coat up about her ears and seated herself on the ground, leaning back against the tree trunk. Five minutes afterward she was sound asleep.

She awoke presently with a start. Sitting erect, she realized that her sleeping senses had detected the nearby thudding of a horse's hoofs. The sounds ceased, and

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there came through the night a hissing whisper:

"Miss Joyce! It's Slim!"

Joyce thrilled at the words and struggled to her feet. "Here I am, Slim!" she returned in a low tone. "Ride into the shadow of the tree, and— My heavens! What's that?"

She stood at the foot of the old oak, staring through the blackness at the strangest thing she had ever seen on Tyrone Ranch.

Directly over the house glowed three red lights, one above the other, apparently about three feet apart. They were moving into the southeast slowly, all three traveling the same pace. They looked to be about the size of ordinary lanterns or lamp lights, and seemed two hundred or more feet above the earth.

But their size and their height above the ground depended entirely on their distance from the amazed girl. For instance, if they were a mile away instead of just above the ranch house, as they appeared to be, they might have been far larger than she supposed and maybe a mile or so up in the sky.

The black night made it impossible for her to judge accurately. But remembering the jackknife that she had seen protruding from the veranda roof, she instantly jumped to the conclusion that the red lights were directly over the ranch house and not far above the earth.

Slim Cook had ridden closer while she gazed at the mystifying lights. She saw the bulk of his horse looming through the blackness.

"Look, Slim!" she cried in a low, husky voice. "Look over your shoulder, and—"

There came a sudden clamor of feet close at hand. On all sides of the returned messenger dark forms arose and closed in on him and the horse that he rode. There came the thud of fists, a curse, the hubbub caused by the frantic hoofs of a rearing horse—and then a six-gun spat fire.

"Thought maybe ye'd be showin' up about to-night," came a croak of triumph from Noah Littlejohn.

Then Slim was dragged unmercifully from his saddle, and a fierce struggle took place on the ground, with several men manhandling Joyce's messenger and bearing him to earth.

From the melee a tall figure separated itself, and next instant Joyce saw the flash of Littlejohn's electric torch. By its light she was able to see the men milling around, Slim in their midst, bent halfway to the ground, but struggling valiantly.

She started forward, straight toward the man with the ghostly face and the now triumphant bloodhound eyes. Littlejohn switched his light toward her, then trotted to meet her, to prevent her from interfering with the capture of Slim Cook.

"You keep outa this!" he warned. "I told this man that if he ever drifted back to Tyrone Ranch I'd 'tend to 'im proper. Stay where ye are, Joyce, or I'll—"

But Joyce heard no more. She stopped in her tracks, and shrank back from the dictator of Tyrone Ranch. On the ground, trampled by the feet of the struggling men, lay a piece of white paper. She had seen it fall from the hand of Slim Cook.

It was a message from Lin Columbia, she was certain, and, whether Slim was taken away from her or not, she could get it later, provided none of the raiding party observed it. So playing her part—for she could be of no assistance to Slim, anyway—she backed away from Littlejohn until she touched the gigantic oak once more.

There, as she waited, wide-eyed, for the end of the fierce struggle that was taking place before her, the disk of brilliance made by Noah's electric torch played over her. And, half consciously, out of the corners of her eyes, she saw the mysterious red lights float away into the south and disappear against the black sky.

Then, tied hand and foot, Noah's satellites bore Slim Cook away through the dark, with some one of the party leading his horse.

"Guess that'll be all for to-night, Joyce," came Littlejohn's fiendish chuckle, accompanied by a goblin grin. "Go to th' house and git to bed."

Slowly, looking anywhere but at Littlejohn and the place where the paper had fallen, the *mestizo* walked away from the oak.

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But she knew that nobody save herself had seen the paper fall, and that it was still lying, trampled and crumpled up, close to where the faithful Slim had dropped it.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAN AT COONSKIN.

AS she groped her way back to the house, worrying over the possible fate of Slim Cook, Joyce decided that Littlejohn and his ruffianly gang had not seen the three red lights moving across the black sky. They all had perhaps been too intent on making their capture of her messenger a certainty to have noticed the strange illumination.

So many things were crowding one another for place in the *mestizo's* mind that the unusual happenings seemed to stun her brain.

First, the mysterious shadow of the head and shoulders of a man on the floor of the veranda—then the rusty claspknife, open, and buried deep in the shakes of the roof—now three weird red lights floating along slowly over the ranch house—and the interruption of her startled viewing of them by the ranch hands pouncing upon the man who had stolen to her with a message from her lover.

She hurried when the lighted windows of the house served to show her the path from the gate. Opening the front door, she slipped noiselessly inside, to go at once to her own room. She seated herself by the window, left the light burning for about the time required for her to undress and go to bed, then continued to sit there in the dark, waiting until she considered it safe to slip out once more and recover the paper that Slim had dropped.

Now and then she tripped to the other side of her room and peered out toward the bunk house, the windows of which still were radiant. It was an hour after she had extinguished her own light before the bunk house windows became dark, and she waited an hour longer before again venturing out.

Everything was silent, however, when she at last sallied forth, stepping softly and seeking the shadows for protection. She lay flat and crawled under the fence rather than risk making a noise in climbing over the great gate of the ranch house yard. Now she slipped along in the direction of the massive oak, thinking about Slim and what the vengeful Noah might do to him.

She came to the tree at last, stood there, scarcely daring to breathe, while she strained her ears for the slightest sound. In her pocket was a box of safety matches; she had not dared to risk bringing along a lantern. She stole finally to the scene of the conflict between Slim and the Tyrone *vaqueros,* and began feeling about over the ground for the paper.

Something crackled under her touch. She took out the box of matches and lighted one. Guarding its light with a hand, she noticed something that had escaped her in the excitement of the struggle. This was that what she had considered one piece of paper was in reality several bits, lying close together, and greatly torn and marred. Quickly she collected what fragments she could, thrust them into her pocket, and stole silently back to the house.

In her own room again, she was almost afraid to relight her lamp, for fear that some one might be watching from a bunk house window. But she was too anxious to find out what she could of the message that Linneus Columbia had sent to her; so she lowered the shades, took the risk, and lighted the lamp.

She sat down beside her little table, removed the mistreated fragments of paper from her pocket, and attempted to flatten them before her.

She found, to her dismay, that they were all but hopelessly marred. Boot heels had ground them into the soil; spur rowels had raked them; leather soles had slipped over them, defacing the writing.

There were seven pieces, twisted and torn and covered with dirt. Carefully she began piecing them together, trembling with excitement and nervous from disappointment. She recognized Lin's handwriting at once, although she was able to decipher only a word here and there.

She wet her handkerchief in the water pitcher of her old-fashioned bedroom set

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and endeavored to wipe off the dirt, only to discover that this process tended to make the writing more blurred and more smeary still.

The largest piece of all of them convinced her beyond a doubt that Lin had written the message. The failure, in most instances, to dot his " i's " was, to her, a well known characteristic of his handwriting. And on this fragment the neglect was peculiarly noticeable. Lin's " i's " and " e's " were sometimes very similar.

The words on the other pieces were smeared or obliterated entirely, and she could not make out a single sentence. So now she sat and tried to get some idea of what he had written her by studying the largest section.

It was apparently what remained of the top of a sheet of paper, and it looked to the girl as if, with missing letters restored, it would read:

> . . . afraid to go ahead with whatever you think.

" Probably he wrote, ' Do not be afraid to go ahead with whatever you think best,' " she mused aloud.

Then she gave her attention to the second and third lines, and over them she wrinkled her brows. They could be construed into:

> Plan some way to keep him out of the kitchen.

" Plan some way to keep him out of the kitchen," she repeated to herself. " Snipe-Shooter Quinn, of course! Slim Cook has told Lin about him. Lin must believe that the gang will want him to continue as cook so that he can spy on mother and me, and keep tab on what we may try to do to defend ourselves against Noah Littlejohn.

" I wonder if Slim told Lin just what a desperate character Snipe-Shooter is? Oh, what a pity I can't make out any more of Lin's message! And why doesn't he come in person to help me? And now—now Slim is in the hands of Littlejohn, and—and—"

But here she lowered her head to her arms, folded before her on the table, and began to sob.

Presently, however, she jerked her head erect, dashed the tears from her eyes, and looked defiance at herself in the mirror which adorned the top of her plain little dresser.

" You big infant!" she chided her reflection. " Get out of here and get to work! Find what they've done with Slim, and learn from him what Lin had to advise. Set Slim free, if they're holding him somewhere, and send him back to the Peddler's Crutch. You make me sick!"

And two minutes afterward she had buckled on her thirty-eight, softly raised the window, and was crawling through to seek Slim.

To detail the careful search that Joyce made that night in an effort to locate the missing messenger would only serve to burden this narrative. Suffice to say, then, that she went over the headquarters portion of the ranch thoroughly, and did not go to bed until the eastern sky showed gray with the dawn, but found no trace at all of Slim Cook.

She arose that morning, after about an hour's sleep, and worked hard with her mother in the kitchen preparing breakfast. The meal was eaten in silence, and the men lazed out to begin the duties of the day. Joyce went to the corrals when she thought that nobody was about to see her, but failed to locate Slim's horse.

But she did not despair. Shortly after the noon meal, and when the kitchen had been cleared, she went again to the corrals, caught her own horse, saddled him, and mounted. Then she rode briskly away into the northeast, bent on a wider search of the ranch for some trace of Slim Cook or his horse.

They could not have killed him, she reasoned, meaning by this that their villainy would not lead them into such an act. They had imprisoned him somewhere, and doubtless meant to hold him until they had attended to whatever treachery they had in mind, so that he would not be free to help Joyce and her mother out of their difficulties.

She knew the country for miles and miles about, even to the distant banks of the rampageous Pipe-Organ. There were deep for-

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ests and valleys and cañons, which offered many hiding places.

There were cow camps here and there throughout the country, where, during the summer months, *vaqueros* were stationed to care for the cattle. She doubted not that Slim had been transported, securely bound, to one of these camps, where he would be held and fed until Littlejohn saw fit to set him free.

At breakfast and at dinner she had watched carefully, and had seen none of the men secreting food in their pockets to be carried to the captive. They would be obliged to feed him if he was alive.

So she concluded that this could best be done, without her knowledge, at one of the various camps. She decided, then, to investigate them first, one by one.

She had made arrangements with her mother to prepare supper alone for the men, for she doubted if she would be back in time to help her. Nobody had seen her ride off, she thought, so now she lifted her pony into a swift lope and swung him due north toward a dense, black forest of conifers that bordered the ranch.

The nearest of the cow camps was called Coonskin. It boasted a ramshackle log cabin which stood in the timber at the edge of a green mountain meadow, dampened by many springs. It was two hours' ride from the ranch house, so she sent her horse along at a rapid gait.

The afternoon was still comparatively young when she rode through a neck of trees and stopped her horse at the edge of them, although keeping him hidden from any one who might be in the extensive meadow that lay below her. Dismounting, she lowered her reins to the ground and stole forward until only a few trees stood between her and the open land below. Behind one of them she secreted herself and peered cautiously around the massive trunk.

On the vast mountain meadow the sun shone brightly. Two hundred or more red cattle were dotted over the expanse of green, mopping contentedly at the bluejoint, timothy, and redtop which composed the grazing. No *vaquero* was in sight. Through the trees beyond the meadow she saw the rusty roof of the ramshackle Coonskin cabin.

The cow-punchers who made the camp headquarters had little enough to do at this time of year. It was their duty to see that too many cows from other sections of the range did not drift to this meadow and overstock the grazing.

Also to see that their particular bunch did not roam elsewhere until it was time to move them to a new pasture in order to give the grass of this meadow a chance to recuperate. Little or no herding, then, was necessary, and the men stationed at this camp could do pretty much as they pleased.

The girl watched for ten minutes or more, and finally decided that the cabin across the meadow was unoccupied. So she went back to her horse, swung into the saddle again, and rode out on the meadow.

She watched carefully as her horse crossed slowly, but no one came in sight. They left the meadow on the other side and entered the woods.

Here the girl dismounted again, left her horse, and walked toward the cabin on foot. Hiding presently behind a tree trunk, she took up a second long observation of the cabin, but saw no sign of life.

So, to throw off suspicion provided anybody should put in a sudden appearance, she went back and mounted, and then rode boldly forward, humming a familiar little tune.

Close to the cabin she halted her horse once more, and sat listening. She heard no sound save the soft whispering of the wind in the needles of the pines and the blatant fretting of a bluejay, hopping about from limb to limb on important business of his own.

She rode straight toward the cabin, then passed around to one side of it and looked in through a window.

And then she received a shock. For, seated at a rickety little table, absently playing solitaire, sat a lank, red-headed man with brooding, melancholy eyes. He was Snipe-Shooter Quinn, supposed to be well on his way to Spruce in search of a second cook.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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On Advance of Time

By GEORGE KEYPORTS BRADY

"AGAIN I ask you, Elsie Macumber, will you marry me?"

"Me, Elsie Macumber, the daughter of a full time engineer on the Pennsy railroad, marry the likes of you, Sam Dobinski? You what's only a hostler down at the round house! Isn't it fine nerve you're possessin'."

"Because I'm a hostler y' won't marry me, eh?" Dobinski punctuated his sentence with a large stream of tobacco juice, as if he wanted to lay all the dust about the signal tower where they were standing. "Because you got fine black hair and pretty black eyes and a hell of a pride you won't marry a Polack like me. Because you got a pretty face you think you can marry any man on the division, and so you snaps your fingers at a hostler. Tell me once, what was your father when he first went to work on this line?"

"No, Sammy, you're a hostler. That's bad enough, but it ain't the real reason I won't marry y'. It's because I don't love you, that's what. I would marry the devil, or even a hostler if I was sure I loved him, but if I was dead sure I didn't love him I wouldn't marry the guardian angel of Saint Peter, if he was t' ask me for me heart and hand, and offer me a crown of glory t' boot. 'Tain't pride, Sam Dobinski. It's just me."

"It's five times I've asked you, and—"

"And if it was fifty times I'd still be sayin' no, just as I do now. You better stick to that little Duch girl, Marie Gross, that I saw you cuddlin' down in the park th' other evening. The man I love has got to be taller than I am, and brave. Y' ain't neither."

"Y' say I'm not brave, eh?" Sam flushed to the roots of his hair, although his reaction was nearly obscured by his coat of grease and soot. His beady eyes narrowed down the dangerous slits, and the hammer he held in his hand swung dangerously back and forth. "What for do you say that?"

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"You know why, Sam Dobinski. Last Saturday you let that young wop dare y' to be seen again with Marie, an' y' didn't knock his teeth out then and there. And here it is Wednesday an' you ain't had a date with her since, an' what's more y' ain't even asked her for one. She told me so herself. So be off with y' now, and don't ask me no more."

A heavy freight, headed out of Toledo for Mansfield, Ohio, came slowly along the track, and as it passed Elsie handed a dinner pail up to one of the brakemen who boarded with her family. Sam, who had been waiting for clearance on this track in order to drive a free engine down to the round house, climbed deliberately up into the cab, but his blood was boiling furiously.

Elsie, with the long free stride of a big strong girl who has never learned the art of "cultured" walking, swung round the tender of the engine, and started across lots toward the high road. As she did so, Sam grasped the throttle and gave it a vicious jerk.

There was a snort of steam hissing through the valves, as the huge drivers slipped swiftly on the rails, unable to get traction so suddenly. Instead of easing up on the steam pressure, Sam Dobinski, furiously opening the sand pipes, poured sand on the rails. The huge drivers, hissing and screeching, tried to take hold, but went on spinning ineffectually.

Elsie, hearing the racket, glanced back over her shoulder, and remarked to herself, "The blame fool, treatin' a perfectly good engine like that just because a woman tells him the truth about himself!" Then she continued along her path, ruminating as she went. "Imagine me, a strappin' big Irish lass, married t' a little runt of a Polack like Sam. Just picture the census taker a-comin' to the door. 'Sure now, and who are you that lives here,' says he, polite like a raisin' of his hat. And lookin' at the likes o' me he expects t' hear a good soundin' name that reeks o' the Emerald Isle, somethin' like—well, just for fun let's say Mrs. Patrick O'Hara."

If a certain young giant of a brakemen on the Toledo division had heard that last observation he would have made the fur fly proposing to Elsie Macumber. But then if he had been there the remark would never have been made.

Perhaps it was the fact that she had a date with Patrick for that evening that put his name in her mind, and there may have been a bit more to it than that.

"But instead of sayin' Mrs. Patrick O'Hara," Elsie said to herself, "I blushes an' says, Mrs. Sam Dobinski. Then the census man gets even more polite because he thinks sure I'm lyin' to him, but he writes the name in the book because it's his business to record souls and not to save them. 'And how many little Dobinski's be there,' he says. 'Fourteen,' says I, feelin' a wee bit embarrassed."

Elsie burst into a roar of laughter at the idea of herself as the mother of children named Dobinski, and continued across the lots, wondering how long it would be before Patrick O'Hara would have nerve enough to—well, to stop hesitating and get down to the business of buying a ring for her.

"If the great big handsome ox weren't such a bashful, blushin' thing, I could have lined him up weeks ago."

Meanwhile Dobinski recovered sufficiently from his wrath to realize that he was abusing one of Mr. Baldwin's best locomotives. He curtailed the steam until the drivers began to behave themselves as their inventor intended they should, and the engine moved smoothly off down the siding, crossed over onto the now vacated down track, and proceeded toward the round house.

When Dobinski put the engine in its stall he went about his customary duties, but his fellow workmen declared he swore even more viciously than usual, and they observed that he barked his knuckles by giving an extra hard jerk on a nut he was tightening.

Finally they saw him pick up his hammer and walk deliberately across the round house to a pit where a young Italian was working, and without any warning he fell upon his victim so viciously that the man had to be carried to the hospital for facial repairs.

Only the timely interference of the workmen prevented Dobinski from killing the

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fellow with the hammer. In the language of the round house "the runt Polack was in one hell of a rage."

At noon, when Dobinski went off duty, instead of going to the "hash house" for grub, he proceeded to get royally drunk, and during the process gave public vent to uncomplimentary remarks about "that damned stuck up Macumber girl." By the time his companions carried him to his room Dobinski was in a fine mood to commit murder.

II.

In the small hours of the morning the next day the Pittsburgh-Detroit Express, running on a seven hour schedule, drew into Mansfield, one hour behind time. Heavy weather on the first part of the run, had slowed the train down and forced Macumber, the engineer, to lose time.

At Mansfield the station master handed him an "advance of time" order, which meant that Macumber was to do his best to make up the lost hour, so that the crack express train could live up to its reputation for arriving on time in Detroit. Under such an order the engineer knew he would have clear track all the way, that all the block signals would flash "green eyes" at him as his train roared past.

Once out of Mansfield, Macumber opened up the throttle. For fifteen years he had made this run, and he knew every mile of the track thoroughly, knew just how much time he dared to make every inch of the way.

He sat with his hand on the throttle and watched the steam gage climb, while the fireman worked furiously keeping up the pressure. At every mile Macumber glanced at the block signals to be sure of his clearance ahead, although his orders practically assured him that his track was clear.

The white lights of one small town after another flashed into view, and quickly faded away in the rear of the on-rushing train. Sixty miles an hour the gage registered, and then slowly climbed to sixty-five, and still more slowly crept up toward seventy.

Passengers, asleep in their berths, woke up under the swift motion, and the more accustomed ones congratulated themselves on the fine time the train was making. Some, not so anxious for speed, lay nervously awake and worried over the furious pace, while the train plunged on through the gradually graying dawn towards Toledo, its first scheduled stop.

At five o'clock the train flashed past the Walbridge block that marks the entrance to the Toledo yards. A heavy fog hung low over the Maumee valley, making sight ahead impossible beyond a very short range.

Half way up the yards on the down track, waiting for clearance papers from the yard master, stood the early freight headed for Pittsburgh. Patrick O'Hara, the brakeman on this train, had walked forward to talk to the engineer until the train was ready to pull out. Both men heard the shriek of the whistle on the express as the train plunged through the yards.

"He's making sixty, and all the time I've been on the road," declared O'Hara, "I've never known him to go through the yards a mile above forty."

"You're allowed all the tracks will stand on an advance of time order," replied his companion, "but I'd hate to be making that speed through all these switches."

They both stared ahead into the fog to see the express shoot into view. At that instant, and much to his amazement, O'Hara thought he saw a free engine moving slowly along a switch track parallel with the up track along which the express was advancing. He knew the siding ran out onto the main not twenty yards ahead of the place where he was standing.

He calculated the speed of both the engine and the express and realized that the free engine would arrive on the main not very far in advance of the express, and too close to the express to allow time for stopping before a collision occurred.

He spoke to the freight engineer about it, but the man assured him that the up track switch signal showed a green eye, which meant that the derail on the siding would prevent anything from arriving on the main ahead of the express. But in spite of this assurance, O'Hara continued to strain his eyes as he gazed into the heavy fog ahead

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and watched the ghostly form of the free engine creeping over the rails.

Then he heard an ominous click which he instantly recognized as the lifting of the hand control of the derailing device.

Visibility was so low, due to the dense fog, that he could not distinguish the person who lifted the derailer. Was it possible the infernal fool did not know the express was thundering along the up track at that very instant?

Everybody in the yard had been discussing the speed which constant telegraphic reports indicated Macumber to be making. Yet here was some stupid hostler letting a free engine out onto the main at a moment when a wreck would be inevitable.

There was no doubt about the derailer having been lifted, because the free engine, without a pilot, glided out onto the up-track. The freight engineer turned pale as he realized what was about to happen.

"God help the express," he muttered to himself.

The express could be heard rushing up the track at a speed only possible under advance of time orders. Otherwise an experienced and trusted engineer would have been proceeding more cautiously through the yards. A wreck appeared absolutely certain.

In an instant O'Hara realized that there was but one possibility of escaping it, and that was very slim. Without taking time to think of the awful risk he was taking, he jumped down from the cab, where he was watching, and ran impulsively toward the engine as it glided onto the open track. He bounded onto the catcher, clambered madly up to the rail, and raced wildly along the boiler to the cab.

Whether the engine had up a full head of steam, he did not know, but in that respect luck was with him, as he saw by a glance at the gage. He clutched at the throttle, with the roar of the advancing express in his ears, but not being an experienced engineer he lost a precious moment by pulling the throttle too far open, so that the drivers began to fly on the rails in spite of the fact that the engine already had some headway.

Realizing his error instantly, he shut off part of the steam and began frantically to pour sand on the track.

Behind O'Hara sat Macumber at the throttle of his engine. Secure in the evidence of clearance which the succession of green signal lights gave him, he was plunging along at top speed.

Suddenly in the fog ahead of him he saw the form of the free engine looming up. At first he could not realize the awful possibility as a reality; for a moment because of the strain on his eyes from looking into the fog, he thought he must be seeing things, but in the next instant he saw that a wreck was almost a certainty.

Instinctively he applied the brakes, but even in the act of doing so he knew that stopping was impossible in such a short distance. He thought of the lives at stake in the cars behind him, and recognized that there was danger of throwing the train off the track if the brakes went on too suddenly at the speed he was traveling. However, he had no time to reason about it, and as there was nothing else to do he threw the air valve wide open. The wheels screeched as the brakes locked and forced them to skid on the rails.

For an instant Macumber released the brakes to relieve the strain, then locked them again. The huge iron monster shuddered and groaned under the torture of the strain, but it had been built strong and true, and in spite of everything it held to the rails, while sparks flew from the heated wheels in showers.

Still, to stop so much momentum in such a short space seemed out of the question. The express continued to close up the short remaining gap between it and the engine ahead. Macumber closed his eyes helplessly for what he thought was to be the moment of the crash, and as he did so muttered to himself:

"Where did this engine come from, anyway?"

III.

STANDING back of the yards, hidden by the depth of the fog, and waiting for the crash that he hoped would put an end to the father of Elsie, stood the drunken-eyed hostler, Sam Dobinski. He had gone on

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duty that morning as usual at four o'clock, and, like all the rest of the men, he had heard of the speed the Pittsburgh-Detroit express was making. He was still infuriated by the fact that Elsie had called him a coward the day before, and his enraged brain, excited by liquor, conceived the fiendish idea of taking revenge on the father of the girl.

That his plan involved the lives of others did not trouble him in the least. He waited until all were busy about the roundhouse, then he prepared the freight engine it was his business to take out each morning. He got up steam, and at the proper moment started the engine out of the roundhouse. Since he was performing a regular duty, nobody noticed that he ran the engine out onto a track that led directly down to the main. When he heard the express whistle as it entered the Walbridge block, he gave his engine a small head of steam, jumped off, and, running ahead of it, lifted by hand the derail, which he knew had already been set from the signal tower.

On a clear morning his operations would have been detected quickly enough to prevent damage, but under cover of the heavy fog his plans worked to perfection as far as his part was concerned. He had not thought it possible for anybody on the down freight to mount his free engine and get it under way in time to prevent a collision.

But at the risk of his life Patrick O'Hara had attempted what the freight engineer swore could only have been accomplished by " a confounded brave man or a fool."

Patrick stood at his throttle doing his best to hasten the pick-up on his engine, but as he glanced back over his shoulder he saw that the express was closing in on him in spite of everything he could do. The two engines closed up the gap between them until there was scarcely a yard left, then the drivers of Patrick's engine took hold solidly and his locomotive shot off down the track and began to draw away from the slowing express.

At the moment when the two engines were closest together Macumber had closed his eyes as he stood at the throttle. He waited there, rigid, for what seemed to him an age, until he heard the terrific blast of the whistle on the engine ahead, and opened his eyes to realize that by a miracle a wreck had been averted.

Slowly he released his brakes and crept after the free engine, until a couple of hundred yards farther down the track they both came to a halt.

In the confusion of the moment nobody noticed Sam Dobinski, thoroughly sobered by what he then realized he had attempted, and what would happen to him if he were caught, make his escape by slipping away under cover of the fog.

Macumber climbed down from his cab, and there was wrath in his heart. Convinced that some dirty hostler was responsible for the affair, he advanced toward the engine, expressing himself freely and resolved to take vengeance without waiting for due process of law.

His grizzly jaw dropped when he saw O'Hara climbing down out of the cab to greet him. He knew by all that was holy that Patrick had no business to be there.

" What the devil be y' doin' there, O'Hara?" he called.

" I'm after doin' y' a good turn by keepin' this free engine out o' your reach, is all."

When passengers began climbing out of the coaches to learn the trouble, and the situation was explained, O'Hara found himself a hero, a situation to which the bashful but burly Irishman was not accustomed. Without waiting for formal permission to depart, he dodged around the end of the engine and started back up the track, calling to Macumber to have some yard man take care of the free engine.

" And, Macumber," he added, " use your influence with Elsie to do me a favor some time."

Macumber climbed back up into the cab and muttered to himself: " A funny man, that Patrick O'Hara, riskin' his neck one minute and the next admittin' he's afraid of a woman."

Two days later when Macumber had his time off, he was sitting at home in the evening on the front porch. Like all grizzly Irishmen, he had on loud socks and no shoes, and his feet were perched up on the

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porch rail, waving bold defiance at every son of England that passed along the street. From his virulent pipe the fumes of strong tobacco rose contentedly on the evening air.

The huge Patrick came bashfully up the street, looking like a big overgrown kid that was just about to take in his first dancing party, he was that dressed up, sporting a red tie and the proper equipment to go with it. Under his arm there was tucked a small box of candy.

"Good evenin' to you, Mr. Macumber," he said, while still advancing up the front walk.

Macumber, who was a right deliberate sort of a man, carefully removed his pipe from his mouth and thoughtfully spit over the rail of the porch before he replied:

"An' t' you, also, Mr. O'Hara. Have they caught the runt Polack yet?"

"They have not, Mr. Macumber. It's a great mystery to me why he did it, and it's a nice pleasant evenin', isn't it?"

Pat was trying vainly to conceal the candy box under his hat, but with small success. Macumber realized they were both talking to kill time. He carefully wiggled his toes in his socks, and regarded those flaming garments meditatively before he finally broke into speech.

"Patrick O'Hara, y' are a big strong man, and a devil of a brave one to do what y' did t'other day, but ye are one hell of a coward when it comes to the wimmen. I have did y' the favor y' asked th' other day, and have used me influence with Elsie, but you are the only man living that could get me to propose t' me own daughter for him. Get your big, handsome self into the parlor and take her. She is expectin' y' with considerable impatience."

THE END

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THE PEDESTRIAN'S DREAM

OH, I stand upon the corner
While some taxi blows its horn or
Raucous klaxons make me jump from out my skin;
Stand and wait while autos pass me,
Leaving trails behind that gas me,
As some coupe clips the whiskers off my chin.

Wait, while others go a gliding
Up the avenue, deriding
Me who stands upon my own impatient feet.
Seconds, minutes flee forever
While some chauffeur jams a lever
And retards my irksome passage 'cross the street.

Ah, could I but use each second
That I wait, till cops have beckoned,
In the study of the art of winning pelf—
In pursuit of greater learning
Of the ways of money earning—
I would be a riding in a car myself!

Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift.

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Her Hour of Reckoning

By ELIZABETH YORK MILLER

Author of "Bondage," "Mrs. Marbury's Alibi," etc.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BLACK-BORDERED PHOTOGRAPH.

THE station was some little distance from Mlle. Rosa's restaurant and the electric train of the railway which ran along the canal to Tunis had been standing there for some time, but it was evidently in no hurry. It continued to wait, while Jim Howland and Sara sat watching in a sort of trancelike fascination the speeding figure of Becky Howland, her widow's veil flying in the breeze, her skirt bunched up and her slim, silk-clad legs covering the ground at a good pace.

"She's got it!" said Sara for whom the spectacle held a breathless interest.

She had caught it and with time to spare, for the train didn't make up its mind to go for quite another ten minutes after her undignified race for it.

"Becky always was a queer, sly sort of girl," Sara remarked presently. "I don't believe a word she said about Raymond."

Jim, who had been wondering himself if he believed all that she had said, suddenly took sides with the pretty young widow.

"What object could Mme. Marchand have in lying to you?" he asked.

Sara squinted at him in a crafty way that made his blood boil. He almost hated her when she showed herself as too wise.

"Becky could have several objects. She might want to get even with Raymond for preferring me to her. You see, Becky's old. She must be quite twenty-six or seven. I dare say he did make love to her, once upon a time.

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"And that fortune of hers she mentioned—well, all I can say is that everybody knew her school bills were always behind, and she scarcely ever had any pocket money. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she's Raymond's wife. The way she slanged him!"

"You cold-blooded, calculating young fiend," Jim Howland said, with slow emphasis. "I believe you were sent into this world for the express purpose of breaking hearts. You spoke to that woman as though you were fond of her."

Sara glared at him sullenly. "I *was* fond of her, but I'm not, now. I didn't know she was two-faced."

"Your reasoning is imbecilic," Jim exclaimed in disgust.

"Well, all I can say is that I'm surprised that such a clever fellow as you are can waste so much time on an imbecile," Sara remarked, with an airy toss of her head.

She was very much more surprised when Jim said: "So am I, and I'm not going to do it much longer. I'm going to clear out of this country, and your father can manage his troubles by himself. I'm fed up with them."

"Including me, Jim?" Sara asked, with a little gasp of dismay.

"Decidedly—including you."

"You're—you're fed up with me?"

"*To the teeth!* Now you know."

Becky's train moved slowly out and they saw her sitting there in an empty carriage, resting forlornly against the window-sill, her head on her hand. She seemed to have forgotten that they could see her and that she might have waved to them.

"That poor little woman!" Jim said under his breath.

But his remark wasn't sufficiently inaudible to escape Sara's sharp ear.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded. Then she flung her head down on the table and began to sob noisily.

Fortunately for Jim Howland's comparative peace of mind, the only living soul in sight at that moment was an Arab waiter at the end of the veranda, and he considerately turned his back.

"Must you always make scenes?" Jim demanded angrily.

Sara raised her head and stared at him. Her face was flushed and tear-stained.

"You call it a scene! It's my heart's blood. You hurt me, Jim Howland. You hammer and hammer on my brain, just like the drum I told you about, and then you expect me to be calm under it. I believe you've fallen in love with Becky. That's just the sort of cat she is—she has only to look at a man and he's ready to make a fool of himself over her."

Jim pursed his lips together and drew in a scornful breath. It would have taken very little indeed, at that moment, to prod him into assisting Sara with what he had called her scene. A rising sense of hysteria was on him. The only thing he could think of by way of relief was to pay the bill and get off—it didn't matter where.

He succeeded finally in catching the tactful waiter's attention and the luncheon paid for, he took Sara firmly by the elbow and propelled her out into the disordered welter of ancient Carthage.

They went down a little decline, at each step treading underfoot the broken relics of a long dead civilization—bits of mosaic, smashed pottery, an exquisite fragment of carved marble—broken, but none of it crumbling. A herd of little goats, tended by a dark-skinned child, browsed on the scanty grass beside the path. French villas with gardens enclosed behind coarse stuccoed walls were pitched here and there between the excavated ruins. A new and perhaps less substantial civilization built upon the old ones!

Over it all the sun burned down upon them, as it had burned for countless centuries upon the pageant of life. But here were memories that could be recalled, or at least imagined, by the stroke of a hand on a warm and stricken marble column, with its beautifully chiseled capitol almost intact.

Common little flowers blossomed radiantly between the broken spaces of that felled column which had once, nearly two thousand years ago, formed a conscious unit in an impressive Roman amphitheater. The stone seats of the old playhouse ranged steeply up and up, and down in the depths

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were sinister things, the runway for the beasts who were destined to devour Christian martyrs. That, as evidenced by an engraved memorial tablet, was the special interest of this particular bit of Carthage ruin. The martyrs were both women and in memory had been made saints.

"There were really saints in those days, Jim." Sara spoke in little catch-breath sentences. "They didn't pretend. They were real and they let themselves be eaten alive by lions for what they believed. I don't think I could do that. I should be such a coward—even when it came to standing up for God—if I had to be eaten alive by lions to prove my faith!"

"There might be harder things," said Jim, who was feeling very gloomy, indeed.

It seemed strange to him that there could be buttercups, dandelions and daisies—little star-eyed daisies—carpeting this place; just like any other spot on earth! Springing up between the broken columns and the ruined masonry—there must be a sign in that. He tried to think what the sign could be, but his idea ran away, eluding him. It wasn't much of an idea, anyway—none concerned with just daisies could be important.

Sara sat down on the broken column and took off her hat, throwing it onto the ground. She spread her hands flat on the smooth, sun-warmed marble and bared her throat to the breeze. So hot and still it was, here. She felt a sort of contentment that couldn't have been analyzed, even if she had tried. It had nothing to do with time or place—it was just a standing still of the senses; one wasn't tormented by thought, even.

That breathless hush!

But presently the little breeze on her throat awakened her and she opened her eyes after a delicious interval of semi-consciousness to see Jim sitting moodily on the ground and in a manner of deliberate spite pulling an innocent daisy to pieces.

"Stop—you're hurting it!" Sara exclaimed passionately.

Jim's mouth drew down at the corners and he threw away the tattered remains of the little flower.

"I'm learning from you," he said. "Since when have you decided not to hurt things?"

"What do I hurt?" she demanded. "You're always finding fault with me, Jim! You do hammer me so unmercifully."

She slipped off the column and sprawled on her hands and knees to his daisy patch, grinning sheepishly.

"Jim—say you don't mean it. Say you're not going to desert daddy. What on earth would he do if he didn't have you to help him look after me! It would be so cruel to daddy, Jim."

She hitched herself into a sitting position a little closer, looking up at him sidewise, like a coaxing child.

"There's no dealing with you," Jim declared sullenly. "You're a sneak for one thing. You promised your father that you'd have nothing to do with that man, and now it seems you've been in correspondence with him all along."

"I promised nothing of the sort!" Sara flashed back. She suddenly decided that she didn't in the least care for Jim's daisy patch, picked up her hat, jammed it hard on her head and went back to the broken column. "I told daddy that I wouldn't try to elope again without giving him fair warning. I never said I wouldn't write to Raymond. And now I shall give him warning. You can watch me, both of you, but I shall probably run away with Raymond in spite of you."

"As far as I am concerned," Jim announced, "you may do what you please. I shan't be here to watch you."

"Then you did mean it—you are going away? And yesterday I thought you were in love with me—!"

"It's rather a mystery to me how you got that idea into your head," he interrupted angrily.

"Men are so deceitful," Sara murmured. "I suppose you've been in love heaps of times."

"Rather!"

"How disgusting! And will be again?"

"I hope so," Jim said bitterly.

"How do you know when you're getting over it with one and on with the next? Do they overlap? I mean do you always *know* when you're falling out of love?"

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Jim got up and dusted his knees and elbows vigorously.

"I don't think I've anything to add to my confession," he said. "You know as much about falling in love as I do. I rather think you could give me a few points on the subject, and your curiosity strikes me as being extremely vulgar."

"There you are again—always finding fault with me," said Sara, with a charming, woebegone pout. "Why, from the way we've been quarreling, you and I might almost be lovers. I like quarreling because it's so nice to make up afterward. Isn't it, Jim? Shall we make up, now?"

She rushed at him and threw her arms around his neck before he realized her affectionate intention.

"Darling, darling Jim! You're not to leave me. I don't want you to go away. If you think I was a sneak for writing to Raymond, I'll confess to daddy—although I dare say he knows already, and it certainly wouldn't surprise him to find out."

There were tears on Sara's cheeks and some of them got transferred to Jim's as she pulled his face down to the level of hers and pressed warmly against it.

His arms went around that slender little body and he held her tight.

"Oh, Sara—Sara!" he cried in a shaking voice. "You baby, you love—you must know how much I adore you! You must know how you torture me. I don't believe you really care for that man or you couldn't—*couldn't* do this."

Sara slacked away from him, pushing herself free with her hands pressed against his breast. Her eyes were wide and startled.

"I don't know, Jim—I don't know," she whispered. "Oh, shall we go back, now? Am I a traitor as well as—as a sneak?"

Jim took the little hands and kissed them gently on the palms. There was a happy glow in his eyes. Sara didn't know that she cared for him, but now he began to believe that it might be true.

They walked slowly back to Mlle. Rosa's restaurant where they had left Sara's car. Once she took Jim's hand and pressed it hard.

"You must help me to be good," she whispered. "I'll try. I'll really do my part, Jim. We'll have dinner in our sitting room to-night, won't we? Then my poor mother won't have the sight of me to worry her. It seems funny to have a mother who's married to somebody that isn't your father. It makes me feel all creepy.

"Oh, Jim, I shouldn't like that to happen to my children. Of course—if one was a widow and got married again, that would be different. I wonder if Becky *is* married to Raymond? She said not, didn't she?"

To Jim Howland the most amazing thing about Sara was the cold-blooded way in which she attacked tender subjects. It made him wince and caused him a great deal of embarrassment. That wild, lawless streak in her nature sometimes seemed innocence, and sometimes it seemed to be bred of too much knowledge. The combination of stupendous innocence and knowledge frightened him.

The hand that tamed Sara would need to be kind as well as firm, otherwise her wildness would dash her to pieces against its restrictions. She was one of those people of whom it is said they can be led but never driven. The man who tried to drive Sara Brinton would find himself coping with a frantic runaway.

A protective tenderness for her swelled Jim's heart until it bade fair to burst with emotion. Love and pity—but most of all, love. He would give her the best of his love, show her so tenderly what that sort of love meant that she would wake up some day to the fact that he was as much to her as she was to him.

He wouldn't "hammer" her any more. That had only been reaction from his own pain, anyway. It wasn't Sara that he had hammered, but the little devil in her and the thought of that other man. There was an angel in her, too, and if the angel was encouraged to grow the devil would find itself squeezed out.

"Shall we have tea before we go back?" he suggested, as they approached the little restaurant. "You might find it difficult to keep to your bargain if we barged into the hotel with the music going full blast. You haven't trained your feet to behave very well, you know."

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"Oh, yes, I *do* know!" Sara exclaimed. "I wish I could. If I was dead and buried and they came and played 'Titine' or 'Follow the Swallow' over my grave, I'd fight my way out. But I don't suppose they'd allow such tunes in a cemetery. I wonder why not, Jim? It would be so much more cheerful for the mourners.

"Yes, it would be safer to have tea here, I suppose." She sighed, then smiled brightly. "I'm very unselfish, aren't I, Jim? And it does give me such a nice warm glow. I'm simply steeped in unselfishness. It's like a beautiful bath sharp with a whole bottleful of eau de Cologne.

"Once I did that, Jim. I poured a *whole bottleful* into my bath. It did seem such a sin, such an extravagance. I told daddy about it—but he just laughed. Have you noticed, Jim, that daddy always laughs when one wants to be serious?"

Jim nodded, but made no comment. Sara's questions scarcely ever required explicit answers. With her it was usually a case of speaking out loud what was running idly through her brain—an ignorant, untutored but busy brain.

Mlle. Rosa gave them the rapturous, flattering welcome usually accorded to old and dear friends one has not seen for years, hustled the Arab waiter off for tea and toasted raisin bread, and then personally conducted Sara to her own room for a wash.

Mlle. Rosa might never see thirty again, although she was not very far from it, but she had a piquant, lively charm in spite of plain features and a heavy fulness of body. An older, cleverer woman than Sara—Agnes Preston, for instance—would have sensed a mystery in the life of this Tunisian French girl who ran a café-restaurant in Carthage and bossed her servants with capable good humor.

Agnes Preston would have found Mlle. Rosa's bedroom tremendously interesting from the point of view of character. Sara found it interesting for quite a different reason.

"You are affianced, *mademoiselle?*" inquired the amiable woman, with a quick glance at Sara's left hand to make sure that it bore no wedding ring.

Sara shook her head. "N-not exactly," she stammered.

"Ah! But that is coming, no doubt. Coming very soon, *mademoiselle.* I wish you all happiness. I, too, have been affianced, but my lover was killed in the war—the dreadful, dreadful war!"

She took a black-bordered handkerchief from the folds of her bodice, shook it out and blew her nose gustily, her face getting red in the process and tears standing in her round brown eyes.

"I shall never, never get over it," she continued. "Poor boy—and he was in such trouble before he died. Another woman who was jealous of me was making his life a hell. I raised twenty thousand francs on the little property my father left me to pay her off—you may not believe it, *mademoiselle,* but I did that, although it nearly beggared me.

"He wanted me to sell the café outright, but I wouldn't do that—not for another woman, anyway. Certainly not! I said, 'I will work my fingers to the bone for you, and when the war is over, here we will be with something to live on.' It was just one little week after he had taken my money and paid her, that he was killed.

"There was a blow, *mademoiselle,* if you can imagine! As he had to die, wasn't it a terrible tragedy for me that it didn't happen one little week sooner? I have been all these years paying back those mortgages, but soon everything will be clear. And I don't really regret that he had peace of mind for that week.

"I loved him dearly, *mademoiselle,* and I've always been faithful to his memory. Sometimes it gets a little lonely, but—regard, *mademoiselle,* was he not a handsome young captain? Oh, yes, *mademoiselle,* an officer and a gentleman, who fell in love with me!"

A black-framed photograph of the officer and gentleman was thrust at Sara. She took it, stared at it, and slowly every vestige of color left her face. It was as though life, itself, were leaving her.

"*Mademoiselle,* my poor little story has saddened you! Don't—don't let it make you sad. After all—I am not unhappy. You see me? Look, I am smiling. Time

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has taken away the ache, although I am still faithful."

With a shaking hand, Sara set the black-framed photograph back upon the dressing table, noting other ornamentations; a little shell covered box for hair-pins, a pink satin box painted with a decoration of wild roses and maiden-hair fern, a workaday brush and a comb minus several teeth, all set out in good order on a strip of clean, coarse linen heavily bordered with crochet lace.

"What was the name of your lover?" Sara asked.

"'Raymond,' *mademoiselle.* Do you not think it a beautiful name?"

"Yes, I—I did think it a beautiful name," Sara replied.

She went to the wash basin which Rosa had filled from a little brass jug, and bent over it, plunging in her hands and splashing the cool water over her face.

"Oh, but that is so bad for the complexion!" the landlady exclaimed in horror. "I *never* wash my face! Always just ointments, with a damp cloth for the eyes. *Mademoiselle* will have no complexion left if she washes her face."

"I don't care whether I have or haven't," Sara replied.

Somehow she got out of the neatly over-dressed bedroom of Mlle. Rosa, into the fresh air of Carthage at sunset.

Jim had already begun on the toasted raisin bread. He saw no sense in letting it get cold.

"You've been a long time," he said.

Sara looked at him with her curiously old expression—the thing he didn't like.

"I've been a lifetime," she said in reply. "And I didn't know that life could possibly be so long. Will you make daddy take me into the desert? I want to die! What was it Ben Hassan said? They send them into the desert to die, but it doesn't hurt."

"My dear child, what is the matter?" Jim exclaimed in alarm. "What on earth has happened now?"

"In there—" Sara pointed with a trembling hand. "She has his photograph—he had promised to marry her and then he swindled her in the meanest fashion you can imagine, only she doesn't know it, poor thing!"

"*He?* Who are you talking about, Sara?"

"Raymond—I'll never see him again, *never!*"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LOTUS LURE.

"I DON'T think I'm steady enough to drive the car, Jim," Sara said as they were about to get away. "I might run us over a precipice just for the fun of the thing."

It wasn't often that she was willing to relinquish the steering wheel to him. He got her into the little car, grimly avoiding the sight of her deathly pale, set face, and took the driver's seat himself.

There had been something fatalistic in this day beginning as it had with the early morning invasion of the old woman author, and ending—but the day was not yet over.

"Becky probably told the truth," Sara said jerkily. "And I wasn't grateful to her. I said unkind things, and she must have come to Tunis with the idea of helping me.

"It was so extraordinary seeing Raymond's photograph on that girl's dressing-table. It had a black frame. You see, she thinks he's dead. I wonder if some one ought to tell her he isn't—that he's a lying, swindling thief, I—I couldn't, Jim. Something seemed to get me by the throat and choke the very breath out of me.

"You will make daddy take me to the desert right away, won't you? We'll have a jolly time—tents and camels and everything. I shall ride a trotting camel. I think those little white ones are so pretty.

"But then, there's my mother. I'm forgetting about her. We can't just go off, leaving Raymond to hurt her, can we? We must think of something, Jim."

Jim let her run on. He began to hope that perhaps the first shock of her disillusion was over, but when he took another furtive glance at the set white face, he wasn't so sure. He couldn't be at all sorry that it had happened; better now than the catastrophe which had threatened to come later.

Becky Marchand had put a doubt into

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Sara's heart, but it was the girl of the restaurant with her simple story of the lover for whom she had nearly ruined herself, who had shown Lacosta up to Sara in all his brutal villainy. It had been impossible to doubt Mlle. Rosa's story. The woman was unaffectedly honest and sincere.

Sara could even make a shrewd guess as to how it had come about. She knew that during a part of the war Lacosta had been stationed at Carthage, and very likely he had been billeted at Rosa's café, found her easy prey and had taken that mean way to victimize her.

He had probably hired some one to write and tell her the sad news of his being killed in action and she, poor soul, hadn't the wit to suspect the truth and investigate the matter. She had been done out of 20,000 francs and ever since had been toiling to pay off the mortgages. Faithful to his "memory," too!

"Ha!" Sara threw back her head and laughed harshly with such suddenness that Jim's hand lost control for an instant and the little car did an eccentric swerve, narrowly missing a nomad family with their moth-eaten donkeys and smoke-stained household equipment.

"Don't do that!" Jim exclaimed sharply.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking."

Sara glanced over her shoulder. One of the gypsy boys hurled a clod of mud after them, but it fell short. They were followed, also, by a volley of Arab curses.

"I suppose they thought we did it on purpose," Sara said contritely. "Shall we go back and give them some money?"

"Certainly not. They would only mistake our kind intentions. The next time you decide to do some thinking just give me a little warning," Jim replied.

Sara snuggled her shoulder against his and half closed her eyes.

The lights of Tunis and the mountain villages in the background sprang out of the twilight, and slowly across the gulf moved the big tourist ship trailing black streamers of smoke from her three funnels. The sound of a band came faintly on the breeze, and the decks and the port holes were bright with electricity.

"There goes that interfering Mrs. Preston," said Sara. "Good-by—hope I never see *you* again!" She waved a hand toward the ship with an effort to seem light-hearted.

Presently they were in Tunis, threading the uncertain mazes of the traffic. Only the trams could be counted upon to obey the rules of the road and Jim had to give close attention to his steering, but barring a close shave with a blue omnibus packed and festooned with Arabs from the country, coming to give Tunis the pleasure of a visit, nothing happened, and the little car was run finally to harbor in the hotel garage.

As Jim and Sara passed under the portico of the hotel she made an instinctive move toward the window of the brilliantly lighted silk and carpet shop of M. Selig, the merchant de luxe, who always had some new and interesting treasure to show her. Then, with a faint cry of dismay, she drew back.

Mrs. Preston hadn't gone. She had let the ship get away without her, and there she sat on the divan in M. Selig's shop with the usual inlaid table before her on which reposed the usual cup of coffee, while the merchant spread Bokara rugs, soft, richly brown and velvety, for her inspection. Selig's carpets were the pick of all Tunisia, and although his prices were slightly higher than those of the merchants of the bazaars, they were fixed prices and he was thoroughly reliable.

"Oh, Jim, look!" Sara exclaimed. "There she is, monocle and all. What on earth do you imagine she's staying on here for?"

Jim made no reply. He had a very good glimpse of Mrs. Preston through a rift in the decorations of Selig's window and it seemed to him that she was subtly changed from the downright, strictly tailored and slightly masculine elderly woman of the early morning. As a rule, Jim Howland was not given to noticing women's clothes, but since Sara had drawn his attention to it on several occasions, as pleasing to her color sense although of a size for a much larger woman, he could not fail to recognize the brilliant sapphire blue and jetted frock which enclosed Mrs. Preston's ample form

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for one which had appealed from the window of the dressmaker's, next door.

Mrs. Preston did not look younger in it, especially, but she looked gayer—not so staid and matter-of-fact—and in some way she had managed to tone down her too ruddy complexion.

Now, it appeared, she was flinging money recklessly to the winds, almost flirting with M. Selig as she lavished orders upon him.

"She's bought that dress!" said Sara. "Well, it was miles too big for me. I tried it on, but those beaded things can't be altered, and it was too old for me, anyway.

"It's really a grandmother's dress. I wonder if she's planning to make a set at daddy? Oh, my hat, I shouldn't like her for a stepmother!"

Sara turned away from the attractive show window and, entering the hotel, ran up the curving flight of stairs to the main floor from which the lift started. Jim's dignity would not permit him to match her rapid pace but as he plodded behind, more sedately, he realized why she had rushed like that, and that it was a kind impulse on Sara's part. Mrs. Kingslake was in the foyer, and the stoutish man bending over the concierge's desk, making some inquiry, was obviously Mrs. Kingslake's husband.

Those flecked eyes of hers met Jim's briefly as he passed her.

"I want daddy—I want daddy!" Sara cried as she dived into the safe refuge of their suite.

At that moment, indeed, Grayling was the only creature on earth she wanted—but she could not find him.

Grayling's room was in great disorder, the wardrobe door and all the drawers of the chest were flung open, wearing apparel lay tumbled on the bed and floor, and ultimately Jim discovered that a kit-bag was missing. The room was heavy with a stifling odor that made them both dizzy until Jim relieved the atmosphere a little by opening the window.

Sara, reeling away from that cloying, stupifying scent, pressed her hands to her temples with a cry of dismay.

"It's beating on my brain, Jim—just like the Negro's drum! It's beating—beating! Oh, I shall faint!"

It was beating on his brain, too, but he managed to keep his senses and dragged Sara out of the room. He had seen the fragments of the gold-decorated bottle on the floor by the radiator, with a dark patch where the contents had spilled, and he suspected it to be the cause of the heavy odor.

Grayling was nowhere in the suite.

Then it occurred to Howland that perhaps something had happened during their absence in connection with the Lacosta affair to compel his cousin to take some sort of speedy action, in which case there would be a letter left for him with the concierge.

He bent over Sara, who was huddled up in a chair sobbing, and, shaking her gently by the shoulders, he bade her be quiet and not to be silly and to stay where she was until he came back again. Then he raced downstairs to make his inquiry of the concierge.

He was still very dizzy and it was quite plain to him that the little broken bottle had contained a powerful drug of some description, for as he ran down the stairs it took a strong effort of will for him to know that he was in the hotel and not out in some vast emptiness of space with a noise like the music of the spheres ringing in his head. It was painful and at the same time it gave him a feeling of mad ecstasy; the soul was being wrenched from his body, filled with a sharp desire for freedom.

As he brought up at the concierge's desk, steadying himself against it with both hands, the hotel foyer came into vision again, but revolving like a wheel slowing down until gradually it stopped, and the concierge, who had been revolving too, finally sat the right side up in his chair with a serious, questioning expression on his face.

Jim wondered if his condition had been noticeable to the man, and just how long he had been standing there waiting for the room to stabilize itself.

No, nothing in the way of a letter had been left with the concierge, who said, however, that Lord Grayling had left the hotel with a bag which he declined to let any-

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body carry for him. They—the manager and himself—had been rather mystified by milord's manner and had wondered if he were unwell.

Jim got hold of the manager, who came up to the suite with him and upon entering the bedroom immediately recognized the heavy odor for that of a drug called kohr, combined with hashish, which the Arabs claimed to be one of their great secrets. It was, said Mr. Millet, no secret at all for any one who cared to pry into such things. The snake charmers and dervishes and the fanatics who pretended to cut themselves with knives which left no mark, and who appeared to walk barefooted in a bed of hot coals, used it in connection with hypnotism to fool their audiences. The Arabs, according to the hotel manager, were more or less innured to this drug, and had it under control; but upon Europeans it had a disastrous effect, much the same thing as, for instance, a child brought up in a slum may live out its days with comparative freedom from disease, whereas an Eskimo will develop a fatal complaint through but the slightest contact with foreign traders.

It was fairly plain to Jim now what had happened to his cousin in the Corintheum, and also what had happened to Eve Kingslake. Grayling had drugged himself, and she had found him lying there in a stupor before the heady fumes of the drug had evaporated, and she herself had been affected by them sufficiently to believe him dead from a fatal wound.

The hotel manager was greatly excited and as concerned as Jim.

"We must find out where milord has gone," he said. "He has had an overpowering dose of that thing, and it may be days before he returns to his senses. He may—never recover. The Arabs claim that through it they have discovered the secret of the desert—if it's true that there is any particular secret.

"I don't know, myself, *monsieur*—I keep away from such things. Fortunately I am only here for six months of the year, and I have learned to do nothing but attend strictly to my own business. But I see others who commit the folly of curiosity."

All this time Sara was huddled in the chair, apparently inattentive. Jim glanced at her now and then, and cautioned Mr. Millet to lower his voice. The child seemed to be half asleep.

"I'll go now, and let you know when we have news of milord," the manager said in a stage whisper.

He, poor man, was genuinely alarmed. An affair, such as this might develop into, wasn't wanted at all.

The minute the door closed upon Mr. Millet, Sara sat up in the manner of one who has suddenly been awakened from trance or slumber.

"Jim—I've been with daddy!" she cried. "He's going to the sea. Perhaps he means Carthage, but I don't know. He sent me back. We must find him, Jim, because if we don't he may never come back. We've got to find him. Perhaps my mother could help. Whatever happens, we can't let anything happen to daddy.

"It doesn't matter about Mr. Kingslake—whether he finds out or not. I'm sure it won't matter to my mother. We've got to find daddy before it's too late. I know what I'm talking about, Jim. I may have seemed to have been sitting in this chair, but I've been miles and miles away, where there was nothing but just space—and then I found daddy, and he said: 'Go back—go back!' He said other things, too, but I can't remember them."

Jim bent over her, stroking her red-brown mop.

"It's all right, Sara. You've been overcome with something—something like the gas they give you at the dentist's when you have a tooth drawn."

"I've never had a tooth drawn," Sara objected. "And this was real, Jim. I can't remember everything, but I remember enough." Then she put her hands to her temples, pressing them hard. "Oh, Jim, what was it I told you? It's all gone—gone like a dream! Why can't I remember now? About daddy, wasn't it? He's not here, and we don't know where he is, do we? And we're terribly, terribly worried. It's all gone—that dream. It did something very funny to my head, but I'm sensible now."

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Mr. Millet came back after a little time. He had some information. Lord Grayling had picked up a cab in the street and had been driven to the railway station, where he had taken a ticket for Algiers. But he had not boarded the train, as far as could be ascertained. He was last seen in conversation with the chauffeur of a limousine car, who had set down passengers at the station and would then have to make his way back to Constantine solus unless he were lucky enough to find some one or a small party headed in that direction.

The inference was that Lord Grayling had engaged him. Nothing short of an airplane could overtake them with the long start they had, and even then the route was uncertain. They might have gone south, or straight along the coast.

The hotel manager thought it unlikely that the chauffeur would detect anything amiss in Grayling's manner. After the first paralyzing effects of the drug were over, the victim—although not in his own senses—behaved as though he were.

Jim was pretty well at his wits' ends to know what to do next, when, for the second time since that long, eventful day had dawned, the grizzled woman writer appeared.

Fortunately, Sara was not present. He had coaxed her to go to her room and lie down—to sleep a little, if possible.

Mrs. Preston began with an unexpected attack. She said: "Excuse me, young man, but will you kindly tell me why Lord Grayling has run away like this?"

Jim replied in a stereotyped sentence: "I don't know what you mean, exactly."

"Well, I mean this—" said the monocled old lady, arrayed in all of her sapphire blue and jet splendor. "I mean that I happened to meet Grayling as he was getting into a cab with a bag in his hand and a crowd of little beggars shrieking at him for money.

"I drove the children off, and then I said, 'What's all this about? You don't look well. If your daughter won't let me do anything for her, is there something I can do for you?' He looked ill, or I should not have said what I did. I don't believe he knew me, but he was very courteous. He said he was sorry, but he had to 'go on a journey'—that was how he put it. And he mentioned Biskra. He called it 'a jumping-off place.' I thought perhaps you might like to know.

"After I left him," Mrs. Preston went on, "a sort of dizziness came over me. Altogether, I've made a complete fool of myself to-day. I wouldn't care to confess it to anybody who knows me. You don't count, young man, because you're a stranger. I bought a new dress—this one I've got on—and I've had a dancing lesson. I'll be sixty-three next birthday. I told my friends I wasn't going on with them, and I've bought five Oriental rugs for which I have no use on earth. Now, then, can you explain any of this?"

Jim's explanation, had he offered it, would have startled Agnes Preston—bewildered her even more than she was already. In his opinion, she had caught a momentary intoxication from Grayling. But she was sane enough now.

The dancing lesson! In other circumstances that idea would have amused him, but he had no room in his mind for amusement at this moment.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ORDAINED FLIRT.

THE self-styled widow, Mme. Becky Marchand, had something seriously to consider. She sat before the dressing table in her bedroom putting on her war paint with painstaking care. But the applications of eyebrow pencil, liquid powder and lipstick did not interfere with thought. Becky believed in gilding the lily and painting the rose. In her opinion nature could always be improved upon. Even the extreme fairness of her short curly hair owed something to that belief.

Becky's trouble at this moment was more than skin deep, and that pretty face of hers was rapidly becoming a mass of stiff artificiality as much to hide the hurt in her heart as to prove her beauty culture theories. She was trying to make up her mind whether to stay in Tunis or leave before Raymond Lacosta put in an appearance.

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The torment of that indecision was very nearly unbearable.

She could not trust herself. She knew, as it had happened again and again, no matter how strongly she resolved not to give way to him, that Lacosta could master her every time. Her only safety was in flight, and now she feared to do that. She was, as she said to herself, afraid to run away, and the reason of that fear struck down into the very roots of her soul.

It had to be faced—and she was trying to face it now, with lipstick and liquid powder—that she loved the man, although she knew him for an out and out crook and for a traitor to herself, which was the least forgivable. Her love had survived even that. She wasn't at all sure that Sara Brinton had supplanted her in Lacosta's desires.

Becky understood Sara's charm. She thought of her much as Jim Howland did, that the girl had been born for the express purpose of breaking hearts; not knowing, as Jim might have guessed, that Sara had been born of two broken hearts, and so perhaps had to take her unconscious revenge.

Becky had tried to look into her own heart, but it was not easily discoverable. She knew that she hated Raymond Lacosta, that he was neither to be believed nor trusted. He had made her a thousand promises and never kept a single one. Yet there was always the hope that some day he would redeem one of those promises. He could fool her into that hope.

And she knew that even more than she hated him, she loved him. The thought that he would be in Tunis within the week both thrilled and dismayed her. He would be furious with her for coming here, yet she knew she hadn't the strength to leave before he came. At the same time she felt genuinely concerned for Sara; she was quite sincere about that.

Yet such was Becky's curious nature that as she sat confronted by her many little paint pots and her own masklike image in the mirror, she could think of flirtation with other men—with that man on the boat who had such a jealous wife, and with Sara Brinton's attractive cousin. She had to pass on a little of her own pain to other women, who might not deserve it, yet nevertheless must be made to realize that no woman can go through this world without taking her share of the world's great ache.

It seemed to Becky that only women had to bear that burden. She exempted men from it as a matter of course. Men were forgiven—even men like Raymond Lacosta.

As she thought of Lacosta she was self-scornful, and at the same time tremulous. She wished he were here now, but the moment of meeting him would be like a knife-thrust in her heart.

For a little while she sat quietly attentive to that pretty painted mask of her face, resting her hands limply in her lap. It had occurred to her often that Lacosta would ultimately deal her a death blow—literally kill her. If ever she got in his way or seriously menaced him, he wouldn't hesitate—supposing, of course, that he could manage it without risk to himself.

It was an ugly idea. Becky hadn't begun life with the notion that she was destined to be sent out of it violently. She resented such a thought. By remaining here she knew that she was deliberately courting danger, yet she could make no move to avoid it. Her fate was bound about her neck, sealed there for weal or woe, heavy on her like a strong, compelling hand.

She smiled at herself in the mirror, a painted smile, but the white teeth that flashed their reflection at her were her own. In the midst of perplexities she could think of such small, irrelevant things.

The war paint on, Becky wriggled into a black and silver dress which hadn't yet been paid for, and possibly never would be. She went down to dinner. It was all a part of the adventure of life that she sat at a little table by herself—a little table with a vase of flowers and a pink shaded light. She was usually alone. When company was forced upon her, or if she sought it, she became unsteady, unreliable—apt to get out of hand. Alone, she could deal with herself.

She thought of the night, only a few days

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ago, when she had thrust her companionship upon that nice Mr. Kingslake. He hadn't really wanted her, but of course he had been polite. Becky envied Mrs. Kingslake, but apparently the woman didn't know when she was well off.

Their table wasn't far from Becky's, and it was quite plain to the little lady in the war paint that Mrs. Kingslake wasn't giving her husband a bit of a good time.

Something was missing out of his program of happiness.

Indeed, poor Neil was not having the good time he had promised himself. Not the whole of it, anyway. But Becky Marchand was wrong in thinking him miserable. He was only disappointed that Eve had failed to meet his interest in this strange, delightful country, at least halfway. To Neil, companionship was as much a necessity of life as air or sun. When Eve failed him in that respect he pined and drooped.

At this moment he was drooping just a little in the direction of Becky Marchand. Not consciously, of course, but somewhat on the principle of misery loving company. Eve was not in sympathy with him. She seemed determined to keep up her manner of disapproval. She was so consistently bad-tempered and aloof that Neil began to wonder if some great change might be coming into their happy life together—an idea which had only confronted him recently.

In his confusion of mind he looked out for the response Eve should have given him, and found it in a painted-lipped and ivory-toothed smile at a near-by table.

Becky bestowed that smile on Neil Kingslake, not because she had the slightest interest in him, but because she was built that way—compelled to smile when she was all painted up for it.

Shortly after dinner Eve made an excuse and ostensibly went up to her room.

Neil did not know and she could not tell him that Africa was working its old charm on her, calling, calling irresistibly; the song of Sahara that pulled her against her will; the lure of the desert.

Tunis was so far away from what she really wanted. This was a fertile, green land, but in "God's garden," where all appeared to be waste, were growing things that the eye could not see, but the heart yearned to comprehend.

At that moment Eve had a great longing to see her first-born, that child of the desert whom she had abandoned, yet was now being drawn back to by force of the yearning to comprehend the great mystery, the riddle Sahara had set so long ago and which still lacked solution.

Afterward, she never remembered how she found her way to Grayling's suite.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FOLLOW THE DRUM.

NEIL, left to his own resources, had his coffee in the ballroom, and in some way it came about that the painted smile together with its owner drifted in his direction. He did not care greatly by this time whether his wife returned, and caught him with Mme. Marchand. Surely it was no crime to be civil to another woman, even if one did possess a jealous wife; not an excuse for hysterics to offer her coffee and a *crême de menthe*.

The disappointments of the day had filled Neil with a reckless determination to make the best of a bad job. It worried him that Grayling seemed resigned to let Lacosta's scheme succeed, and it worried him to be losing or spending more money than he could well afford. The holiday would have to be cut short, but that was no reason why it should not be enjoyed.

Out of politeness he asked Becky to dance with him and she accepted his invitation in much the same spirit, but Neil was clumsy of foot and they did not repeat the experiment.

For some unknown reason poor Becky felt an overwhelming desire to confide in Neil. He had, what she described to herself, a kind face, and it always seemed easier to tell strangers the story of one's life than intimate friends. Besides, one could embroider the tale to strangers and make it more attractive.

She began with an allusion to Raymond Lacosta which caused Neil to prick up his ears with lively interest.

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"You remember when you asked me on the boat about a man named Lacosta, who was once stationed at Bou Saada, and I said I had never heard of him?"

Neil nodded. "I had an idea that you did know him," he replied. "From the way you rather cut me afterward. I don't blame you for that. I've had certain information quite recently which inclines me to the belief that he isn't altogether a desirable acquaintance."

"It is on account of Raymond Lacosta that I am in Tunis," Becky said in a mysterious voice. "I came here to warn a friend of mine against him, but I don't know whether she's grateful or not. It's a girl I was at school with, Lord Grayling's daughter."

"Really!" observed Neil. "And how—in what way, exactly—"

"Well, as you said, Lacosta's a bit of a wrong 'un, but that doesn't always keep a woman from falling in love with a man. He's out to swindle Lord Grayling on rather a big scale, I fancy. To put it plainly without any varnish, I believe it's blackmail.

"He says when he gets the money, he's going to marry me—that is, if he can get it without marrying Sara Brinton. I came out here to put a little spoke in his wheel, but I'm rather afraid of him. He may do me a harm, Mr. Kingslake. I thought I'd mention that to you, because if anything queer *did* happen to me, you'd remember my saying this."

Here was a suggestion that Neil didn't care in the least for. He hadn't come to Africa to get mixed up with anything of that description.

"I think if I were you," he said gravely, "I'd have nothing more to do with the man."

"Oh, that's easy enough to say!" Becky exclaimed. "I've made a wreck of my life for him and I'll probably go on doing it. I was very fond of Sara Brinton, though, and it wasn't altogether jealousy that made me warn her. She's a lovely little thing—like a red-haired gypsy. Have you seen her?"

Neil shook his head.

"That's queer. They're staying here, you know. Or, then, perhaps you didn't know."

"As a matter of fact, I did know that Lord Grayling was here," Neil said.

It was plain enough that the pretty painted lady did not suspect how intimately he was mixed up with Lacosta's scheme to get a fortune out of Lord Grayling. Why on earth had he been picked for such a tool? He who had made a fetish of honesty in business. The very thought of it made him hot with indignation.

Becky's blue-eyed gaze searched the room. The dancing floor was not so crowded to-night, and it did not take her long to make sure that Sara was not here. Professor Freddy's disconsolate face could have told that to anybody who understood his feelings in the matter. The professor was having a hard struggle to keep from being trampled to death by an old lady with shingled gray hair whose stout form was encased in a sheath of jet and sapphire blue beads.

"Sara Brinton reminds me just a little of your wife," Becky said pensively. "She's got that same wonderful shade of hair, and there's a look about her eyes, too, like Mrs. Kingslake's. Her eyes are dark, greeny-blue with curious lights in them—you might almost say like sparks of sunlight. When she laughs, they dance with sunlight. It was always rather a mystery about her at the convent. We older girls thought we knew what it was. Her father seemed to be her only relative, and I don't believe even Sara knew that he was Lord Grayling."

Neil sat forward, alertly, dangerously attentive. This prattling, babbling "pretty-pretty"—could she have any notion of the queer ideas she was putting into his brain? Was she doing it purposely? No, he didn't think that.

Once you get the real clew to a puzzle the whole thing is apt to become plain.

But, of course, the ideas were ridiculous, no matter how they seemed to dovetail one into another.

"How old is Miss Brinton?" he heard himself asking with a trembling feeling of shame.

"About eighteen, I should think," Becky replied. "She looks older, though."

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Neil suddenly began to wonder where Eve was all this time. Could it be possible that she had gone to bed without saying anything to him? But lots of things were possible in these days. She had altered so tremendously.

The insistent dance music got on his nerves and he found himself repelled by the recurrent sight of that stout woman in jet and blue who seemed bent upon stamping on the feet of her partner. A woman who looked and danced like that ought to have sense enough to perform such gyrations behind locked doors. He had never seen such an expression of idiotic happiness on any woman's face, but the same could not be said of Professor Freddy's.

Neil wondered if she fancied herself in love with her grave young partner. And then he wondered if Mme. Marchand was seriously attempting flirtation with him. She was saying such extraordinary things, to which—until they became too insistent—he had been only semi-attentive.

"You're such a kind man, Mr. Kingslake. Your wife must be a very happy woman. She's lucky, but it looks to me as if she didn't know it. Some women are always nagging their husbands, aren't they? Isn't it funny that they seem to like nagging and making a man wretched?

"Oh, don't think I mean anything—only I've got eyes in my head. I don't mean a thing, really. I'm just lonely and miserable—poor little me—and I'm sorry for anybody else who feels the same way. I'm *terribly* sympathetic, Mr. Kingslake. Wouldn't it be too lovely if everybody in this world was jolly and friendly? What good times we could have!"

The "vamp" in Becky was running away with her as it always did when she had on her war-paint and came out of her seclusion into the warming glow of social contact. She was at heart a wary, shy little beast of prey with all the defects of such a creature, but she had human qualities, too.

She held out her hand over the table to Neil. It was a small hand, rather meager, with fingers like slender pointed reeds, artificially pink at the tips, and a pale palm that suggested a not too robust constitution.

Neil took the little hand and pressed it briefly. To ignore that invitation would have been rude, ungallant. It meant nothing to him and it probably meant less than nothing to Becky Marchand that he took her hand and gave it a friendly squeeze.

So Neil Kingslake, the perfect husband, fell from his high estate with a heavy, bewildering bump. He didn't know that he had fallen. He felt, indeed, wonderfully virtuous at that moment since, to save the situation from developing into sentimentality, he beckoned a waiter and ordered two more liquors, although he was longing to get away.

"I like your idea," he said to Becky, his voice high and hearty. "If everybody could be jolly and friendly—well, we'll drink a wee toast to it."

Becky gurgled with delight. Her painted smile grew wider and wider. She lit a cigarette and made Neil have one.

And he was saying to himself: "Confound this woman. She's becoming an infernal nuisance. How on earth am I going to get away from her!" But he couldn't very well tell Becky what was running through his mind. Perhaps he would have said something harsh had he known that Eve had witnessed his public embrace of that pale, pink-tipped little hand.

"I have left a message for my husband," Eve was saying coldly. "Please don't let it worry you, Mr. Howland. Sara is quite right. We can't allow Aylmar to disappear in such a state without making an effort to find him. Mrs. Preston told you he mentioned Biskra as a 'jumping-off place,' and it was from Biskra we set off years ago. I think I know where he is going. I think I shall be able to find him."

They were in Grayling's suite again and Eve and Sara were dressed for a journey. Jim Howland did not know how he was going to deal with them except by giving in. Sara's idea was to hire a car and race after her father, and her idea had been accepted by Eve who said she was coming, too.

As far as Eve Kingslake was concerned, it would seem that the fat was in the fire,

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or—whichever way one cared to put it—that she had burned her bridges. Jim didn't know what to make of her.

It all happened so suddenly, one thing on top of another, a great tumbling together of events, a heaping-up that confused his wits and left him rather helpless, although he still preserved a measure of sanity.

Sara, he regarded as having gone stark, staring mad.

With her, it was just the cry of: "We've got to find daddy before it's too late. Hurry—hurry, Jim! It may be too late, even now. The negro's drum! It's beating on my brain like a hammer."

She had accepted Eve as an ally, although scarcely thinking of her as a mother, it seemed.

"Mrs. Kingslake knows—she knows we've got to find daddy. Don't you understand, Jim? It's just something we've got to do. Although it may be too late."

"Have it your own way," Jim said.

There was nothing left for him to do but engage a car to follow Grayling.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MOTHER OF HERS.

THERE was something malicious in the fate which kept Neil Kingslake in the toils of the lady with the painted smile just long enough to enable him, when he finally secured his release, to walk out into the foyer of the hotel and meet Sara Brinton who was followed by a page with a bag and dressing case.

He knew her at once for Grayling's daughter, after Becky Marchand's description, and if there had been any doubt about it, the neat black initials, "S.B." on her hand luggage, would have made it plain.

At the moment Neil observed her, the hotel manager came forward and Sara engaged with him in earnest, low-voiced conversation. Without specifically eavesdropping, Neil caught a few words which included an anxious reference to her father and a mention of Biskra.

He wondered, uneasily, if Lacosta had turned up via the train from Algiers, and if the girl had decided to elope in spite of Becky Marchand's warning. But while the hotel manager looked deeply concerned and grave, it was obvious that he was in agreement with what the girl was saying.

Had Neil really wished to eavesdrop he would have been further handicapped by the fact that not only were their voices guardedly low, but they spoke in French, and it was not Neil's sort of French, but a more fluent, capable brand, only to be comprehended in its finer shadings by a native of Gaul.

He was, however, not over-interested in the subject matter of their discussion. It was Sara, herself, who interested, bewildered and faintly shocked him.

An idea had been put into his mind by Becky Marchand, and then contemptuously discarded. Some things are impossible, and that idea was one of the impossible things. How it had reached him, even, Neil could not understand. Possibly through Becky's description of Sara Brinton's eyes, for Neil had often attempted to give Eve a description of her own eyes as observed by him, and he had used the same expression, flecks—or was it little spots?—of sunlight.

Anyway, he had mentioned the word "sunlight." That same word, on Becky Marchand's glibly tripping tongue, had given him what might be termed a jolt. It had started him thinking of Eve in connection with Aylmar Brinton, the man she had known briefly years ago, and only mentioned with reluctance.

Neil was far from being a complete fool, and it had occurred to him vaguely before that Eve and the present Lord Grayling might have had a mutual romance which, of course, could only have terminated a little unhappily if either or both of them had taken it seriously.

Neil stood there watching Sara Brinton in the covert way of a man of good breeding who would feel ashamed to stare brazenly at a beautiful girl, but finds his gaze drawn irresistibly. But he wasn't looking at Sara merely because she was beautiful.

Sara was her father's daughter as Grayling had insisted upon jealously, but she also possessed something of her mother

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which other people had recognized. At this moment, Neil Kingslake was trying not to recognize it. It would be better for him, he thought, if he were blind.

Sara's conversation with the worried Mr. Millet came to an end when a fair-haired and harassed-looking young man in a cap and tweed ulster came bounding up the stairs from the portico and called out to her.

"You'd better come along at once," said the young man. "The car's here, and Mrs. Kingslake is getting anxious."

"I'm coming," Sara replied.

Even then, Neil did not comprehend that Eve was running away from him, but the sound of her name on that strange young man's lips gave him the second shock he had had that night. Definitely it coupled Eve with Grayling's daughter.

A slight feeling of nausea swept over Neil.

Eve's frantic resistance to coming to Tunis, her horror of Raymond Lacosta at first sight, Lacosta's pitching upon him—upon Neil—to forward a scheme of blackmail, Grayling's submission on the ground that a woman had to be protected—a woman who was happily married to another man and did not, perhaps never had cared for him—these things all dashed at Neil and threatened to imperil his reason.

He went out onto the wide terrace that led from the writing room, with the idea of getting away from the insistent fox-trot music. He didn't want to have to think about that elderly woman in jet and sapphire blue who was trampling the professor to death. Was she still at it? But, no—*why* think about her?

The street was garish with moonlight, and in the distance the tail lamps of a big car vanished around a corner. Then there trotted into view the whining, ragged little nomad woman with one child hugged to her breast and a wizened little girl of six pattering on bare brown feet alongside and demanding alms of some one under the hotel portico. This was obviously their recognized pitch, but what nuisances they were! One couldn't stir out of the hotel at whatever the hour of day or night without being assailed by them. There was something in their sniveling insistence which dried up the well-springs of one's charity.

Neil heard a woman's voice say sharply in French; "Don't touch me!" Then came a ring of metal coins on the pavement and the little nomad girl was sprawling about for them with shrill shrieks of delight.

The voice and white fur-coated form he recognized for Becky Marchand's. Evidently she had strolled out to take the air after he left her, but she ought to have known that it wasn't wise to do that sort of thing in this part of the world.

He lit a cigar and continued his restless pacing of the wide terrace. Presently he would go up and find Eve, but he didn't feel equal to it yet.

There was probably nothing at all behind the cruel suspicion which had come into his mind; he must crush it down, force it away, or his mind would desert him.

Back and forth, to and fro, he paced resolutely.

From far down the street he heard the dull, heavy beat of a drum accompanied by the discordant wailing of some reed instrument. It startled, and then held him in a spell for a moment, until he recalled that this was Africa and he had come to Africa to sample novel sensations.

As he renewed his pacing, Becky Marchand's voice sounded at closer range. "Thanks, I'll look. It really doesn't matter," she said to some one in the writing-room, the concierge or the porter, perhaps. Then she stepped out onto the terrace, a white, mysteriously muffled figure, her fair curls gleaming like silver in the moonlight.

"Oh, there you are!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Oh, Mr. Kingslake, I wondered where you were. What has happened? Please forgive me—but something *has* happened, hasn't it? Am I to blame in any way?"

Her flustered air of panic had a calming influence upon Neil. Suddenly he was completely steadied. If he didn't know the worst, at least he understood that soon it might be revealed to him.

"Perhaps you'll tell me," he said quietly.

They faced each other in the silver white

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moonlight. Becky's face appeared distorted, wrenched. But she recollected that and fumbled in her bag for her powder-puff.

"I didn't know what to think—" she replied, still breathless—"but they all went off together in a big car, your wife, Sara Brinton and that cousin of hers—I'd gone downstairs after you said goodnight—I get so restless! You can't imagine how restless I get sometimes. And there was the car and Mrs. Kingslake in it, and Sara's cousin fussing around helping the chauffeur to fasten bags and suit cases on the top.

"Your wife didn't look at me, although I do believe she saw me. Presently she spoke to young Howland—that's the cousin—and he ran upstairs and then Sara came down. She spoke to me before she got into the car. She kissed me, too. She said, 'Becky, I may never see you again, and in case I don't, I'd like to tell you now that I'm grateful to you. I am going on a long journey—we have to find my father'—and that was all, Mr. Kingslake."

"Thank you," said Neil. His dominant feeling was one of great awkwardness. He didn't know what to say to little Mme. "Pretty-pretty." He only knew that he never wanted to set eyes upon her again in his life. A half strangled sense of loyalty came to his rescue.

"Lord Grayling, as you told me, has been worried lately," Neil went on. "You understand in what way, and by whom. I am not at liberty to discuss it, myself. He has gone away and his daughter is joining him. My wife happens to be chaperoning her. Is there anything more you would like to know?"

"N-no," stammered Becky.

Even her blue eyes had turned to silver in the moonlight. It was an eerie effect; a silver-haired girl in a polar-bear coat, with shining white eyes—eyes of liquid moonlight.

How much or how little did Becky believe of his statement? Neil knew, now, that his wife was not in the hotel. He had also grasped the portent of the worried young man's remark to Sara Brinton that Mrs. Kingslake was "anxious."

"Is there anything at all that I can do?" implored the painted lips aided by the eyes of liquid moonlight.

"My dear child, what is needed to be done?"

"I don't quite believe you!" she flashed back.

Neil made a slight movement of his shoulders. It was not Gallic enough to be called a shrug, but the idea was there.

"I *don't* believe you," Becky challenged. "Mr. Kingslake, I can do something, can't I? Tell me."

"Nothing at all is needed," Neil declared stubbornly. "I've told you that before—nothing at all."

"Very well—good night."

Most sincerely he hoped that she meant "good night," finally; that she wouldn't turn up later to bother him again.

After they had achieved the final parting, Neil went up to his room, where he found a short note from Eve.

There was nothing in Eve's note to suggest that she was in any way upset or hysterical. She said merely that Lord Grayling had left the hotel in circumstances which pointed to his not being quite normal and that Miss Brinton was distressed about it and wished to follow him.

Eve had been asked to accompany her and her cousin and she did not feel justified in refusing. They were motoring to Biskra. She added that she was leaving without seeing him personally because she feared that he might raise objections and Miss Brinton was anxious to lose no time.

The thing that Eve did not mention, however, was what she had seen in the ballroom—a pale, pink-tipped hand being squeezed by one of Neil's.

In the state of mind she was in, it could only seem to her that the grasping little hand had taken Neil away from her, or would ultimately find some means to accomplish the theft. If it hadn't been for that Eve would have kept her balance, insisted upon Sara accepting the chaperonage of Mrs. Preston, and been only too relieved, herself, that the whole lot of them were out of the way.

But in her own mind she had already lost Neil and was free to follow the call

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which had been summoning her so long; to seek and find the blue sea of mirage which drew Grayling. If ever it were found, the puzzle of Sahara would be solved.

She was calmly elated, almost happy, as the big car slid out from under the hotel portico where the last of Mrs. Neil Kingslake's well-ordered life was left behind, and Eve—who had once found such strange, inexplicable joy in the desert wastes—was off to look for it again.

Covertly she took stock of her two young companions, wondering if they in any way shared her feelings. Sara had betrayed a certain sixth sense where her father was concerned, a sense which might be termed occult, particularly in a land where the unexpected is always happening, where nothing really shocks or surprises.

It was a land, Eve thought, where those two great forces which influence the souls of mankind, the forces of good and evil, were more sharply defined than elsewhere. Out here those two forces were in naked strife, with whole-hearted legions on either side.

She thought that Raymond Lacosta's unmitigated villainy might be explained on that score. He, too, had learned mysterious things in Africa and had ranged himself with the army of evil. Sara Brinton had caught the sound of it in the street of the Ouled Nails and fled in terror. Which way, wondered Eve, was Sara going?

But Eve's drum was not the drum of the savagely decked old negro in the street of the dancing girls. Eve's was quite a different call to arms. Yet both sides used the drum and to some it might be difficult to distinguish between the call of the spirit and that of the senses.

She remembered how she had fled in panic from the desert, denouncing it for a cheat and mockery; those ghosts of dead cities, the fruit that was not fruit and the little herbs that pretended to be lavender and rosemary, but were noxiously offensive to everything except the indifferent camels. She had gone into the desert and found evil; perhaps the promise she had to redeem was that one day she would go back again and find the good. Perhaps the fault had been in herself.

They had all three been silent until long after the open country was reached. Round about the hills were dotted with the nomads' fires, with here and there an isolated colonist's farmstead. Herds of long-eared and long-tailed sheep, and goats like little dogs, browsed on the scantiest of herbage. There were no meadows for them. They were jealously kept from the good grass.

In the distance a great roaring blaze illuminated the sky, and as the car came up to it they saw that it was one of a group of haystacks with no farmhouse near, which was on fire, the property doubtless of some hard-working French farmer who had incurred the hatred of Arabs or gypsies.

Sara leaned forward staring at it with wondering awe-stricken eyes.

"Oh, what a pity!" she exclaimed. "I suppose the whole lot will catch. That's like we were to-day. We all caught something from poor daddy's madness. Even that Mrs. Preston." Then after a moment's pause, she reached out a hand to Eve and stroked hers softly. "It was kind of you to come with us. I'll never forget it—mother." The last word was brought out shyly.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MIRAGE.

SLOWLY a little caravan moved forward in the face of the setting sun toward the blue sea of mirage. It was just like the caravan of eighteen years ago and at its head rode an elderly man on a gayly-decked donkey, but it was not the same man who had headed the other procession.

He was, in fact, Aylmar Brinton, fourth Viscount Grayling, but scarcely would any of his friends have recognized him. Sara's car had caught him up at Biskra where he was discovered planning a solitary excursion of his own, and he had aged terribly in those few days; aged so much that he did not care for the exertion of coping with a lively Arab mount.

On the surface it all appeared so ordinary that Sara Brinton recovered her high spirits and was prepared to enjoy herself thor-

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oughly. On arrival they had gone the rounds of the hotels and finally discovered Grayling who greeted them with a cheerful:

"Hello—I thought somebody might turn up. I've been waiting for some one, but my memory's got shocking of late and for the life of me I couldn't recall who it was. Now I remember most particularly that it was Eve. I bought a beautiful rug this morning and when we go into the desert, I shall take it to carpet your tent with, Eve."

"What about me, daddy?" Sara asked jealously.

"You? Who are you?" he demanded, pulling Sara's ear. "We don't want any gypsies along."

Sara laughed, but Eve caught an expression in Jim Howland's eyes which matched the fear in her own heart. Grayling didn't really recognize Sara, although he knew that he ought to be able to do so, and didn't want to give away exactly how poor his memory was.

She began to wonder, now, if he had lost eighteen years of his life, and fancied this caravan to be the one of long ago. He had provided himself with crayons and a sketching block for one thing, and it was many years since Lord Grayling had laid aside his sketching and poetizing. He spoke of Ducassin, the silversmith of El Kantara, as though they had seen him only yesterday, and he complained of Eve's choosing an ordinary slow-walking camel for her steed.

"Why is that girl to ride the trotting camel?" he demanded peevishly. "Why aren't you? Although she's a pretty child. Her name's Sara, you said. Ah, I have it! She's really 'Sahara.' You've got her name wrong, my dear. That child is the spirit of the desert, and of course it's right that she should be with us. She has probably always been with us."

Sara giggled nervously and Jim Howland, who was preparing to mount the Arab horse which had been chosen for him, gave a humoring nod of his head and said: "Don't pay any attention. The old chap's having a little game with us."

"Oh, yes—we all know daddy!" Sara agreed.

She was completely reassured since both Jim and her mother appeared to accept Grayling's eccentricities as normal to him, and so she entered into his "little game," saying that yes, her name was Sahara and how clever of him to discover her mischievous secret.

The first day they made camp twenty miles south of Biskra, under the lee of a great sand dune which Grayling had insisted upon locating. As the camel boys were unloading tents and other equipment, Grayling began to direct them, then an expression of confusion came into his eyes.

"You ought to be doing this," he said to Jim who had just handed over the bridle reins of his horse to a nomad who had appeared out of the desert to offer his unrequested service. "Tell me, do I look like Mr. Waverly? Surely it was he who rode the donkey. But never mind. What worries me a little is that we're a lady short. There was a lady who got herself into the most astonishing attitude of any female I've ever seen astride a camel. She was going to win the race or die. We've left her behind somewhere."

Jim glanced around cautiously and was glad to observe that Sara was some distance away absorbed in watching the cook's tent go up.

"It's all right, Aylmar," Jim said. "She was afraid it would be too much for her when she learned that we couldn't have proper baths for a week or so—so she went back."

"H'm," mused Grayling. "Are you pulling my leg or am I pulling yours?"

"A bit of both, I expect," Jim replied.

Grayling drew a long breath. He had thrown off his hat as usual, and the wind caught his beard and thinning gray hair and tossed them into disorder. Those keen, compelling eyes of his were a little dimmed, and his neat slender figure seemed to have shriveled.

"Aylmar, old chap, you'll recover out here," Jim said, moved by a sharp pang of pity. "You know you haven't been very well lately, but you'll get better soon. The air's pretty good, isn't it? By jove, I feel a different man already."

Grayling gave him a look blended of

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suspicion and confidence—a curious mixture.

"I'll get better, or I would—only it happens I've never been ill in my life. If you really want to know what's confusing and troubling me—and I wouldn't tell Eve this for anything on earth—it's that Sahara girl. Eve evidently knows all about her and thinks that I know. But I told you that lately my memory has been shocking."

Jim made a gesture inviting his cousin to walk a little way toward the sunset. The tents were going up successfully under the direction of the head camel driver.

Eve stood by herself some distance apart—as though she wanted to be alone—regarding that deep blue horizon line which to her had always been the sea. The very breath that blew from it was clean, salty.

Sara was now prying into the cook's mysteries, much to his annoyance. His pots and pans, his bags and boxes of provisions and his little charcoal stove were instruments of wizardry which he preferred to keep to himself. One of the several things Sara Brinton did not discover was, that the fresh milk for to-day's tea and coffee resided at the present moment in the dried and scraped skin of a small goat.

"You've accepted Eve," said Jim to the confused Lord Grayling—purposely he did not refer to her as Mrs. Kingslake. "But Sara has puzzled you. Now what about me? You seem to have accepted me, too, although you're careful not to say in what way, exactly. I want to give you a leg-up, Aylmar. If it's really too much for you, I'm your mother's cousin, twice removed. You've been jolly decent to me and there's nothing too much I'd do—if I can—if I'm able—"

"Don't be a donkey, Jim. Of course I know who you are—good old little Jim Howland! Only you've grown up, and what the deuce you're doing down here, I can't imagine, unless it's because you're in love with Sahara."

Grayling's reply was fairly sane, although Jim wasn't sure whether his mention of Sahara was intended for the desert or for his daughter.

"Well, I am in love with Sahara," he said, "only I call her 'Sara.'"

Grayling gave him a shrewd look. "You can't mix them—the desert and a woman—without coming to grief. If I were you, I'd stick to the woman and take her away from here pretty quick.

"I'm going to take Eve away. I should never have brought her here. That was my mistake. The Arabs have a good reason for keeping their women veiled.

"And whatever you do, Jim, don't be tempted to try to find out things that aren't meant for Christians to know. I suppose you *are* a Christian. If you start that game you'll probably begin it in the bazaars and some fat perfumery merchant will slip you a little fancy bottle all stuck over with gilt flowers and containing something guaranteed to waft you to Paradise. He'll charge you for it, of course.

"That's the beginning. The end is just exactly what you're promised—Paradise. Or it may be the other place. I had one once, but ultimately I pitched it away, so I'm free now—I say, look!"

Even as he listened to his cousin's mad fantasy Jim had been looking at what to him was the most wonderful sight he had ever seen, "A rose red city half as old as time," perhaps, which had risen out of the salt wastes on the shore of the phantom sea. It was so real, so clearly defined against the sky line, that it seemed to Jim he had but to mount his little horse and by galloping hard he could reach it in ten minutes.

There were the high bright cliffs, pink and white, up which climbed a picturesque huddle of narrow streets; white and red and mud-colored Arab houses all massed together and crowned by a mosque tower and what was obviously the palace of the Bey. Hard by was a lagoon with ships at anchor; a lazy lagoon, fringed by tall palms.

"By jove!" Jim exclaimed. "I believe the light's still good enough for me to get a photograph of that." His camera had a long distance lens.

He was on the point of darting off to fetch it when Grayling caught him by the arm.

"I spent nearly ten years of my precious young life trying to photograph things like that. Just look at it, remember it, and if the wonder of it sinks into your soul try not

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to let it grip you too hard. The scientists will explain it to you, and let's hope they're right. Otherwise—"

"Daddy—daddy!"

Sara was screaming with joy, running toward them over the hard, sparsely scrub-covered sand. She made a picture, herself, that took Jim's attention from the mirage. A flying figure, small but long-limbed; a red-haired figure, in a scanty garment of the soft white stuff the common Arabs make their burnooses of, her brown legs bare and her feet shod in a pair of gaudy heelless slippers she had bought in the bazaars.

She brought up beside them breathless. "Do you see it? I didn't notice it before. Can't we go there? At least Jim and I could. Why didn't we camp just outside the gates? What city is it, daddy? I do so want to go. Jim, shall we ride over after tea? Tea's almost ready. I've been helping the cook. He's such a funny man. I can't make out whether we've got any milk. Every time I ask him he pretends he doesn't understand my French. Daddy, what is it—what's happening?"

Sara's voice trailed off on a note of acute dismay.

Down went the sun, and the rose red city faded mistily away. Nothing was left but the blue horizon line.

"Oh!" said Sara with a gulp of disappointment. "It was only a mirage."

Tears stood in her eyes. The disappointment had been sharp. This was an initiation for the desert's child; "the spirit of Sahara," as Grayling named her, had failed to recognize for what it was, a freakish aspect of the landscape of her own country.

"But, daddy, it *was* real," she pleaded, tugging at Grayling's sleeve.

"Who said it wasn't?" he replied. "And I wish you wouldn't call me 'daddy.' It's embarrassing. What will Eve think? It makes me seem as though I had a past."

Sara threw an inquiring and alarmed glance at Jim. This "game" of daddy's was being carried too far. It even tended to become unpleasant.

"I think Eve likes her to call you 'daddy,'" Jim said gravely.

"And am *I* the Father of the Desert? Oh, no, my dear Jim—give Allah his just due. The girl is here, just like that comic cut of a nomad who sprang out of the sand to hold your horse. He'll sit, or stand, holding it all night for a franc or two and a crust of bread. The girl is more tenacious though. We shan't get rid of her easily. Depend upon it, she'll stick. She'll be with us for the rest of our lives."

CHAPTER XXIX.

ILLUSION.

IT was a rather wistful little Sara who sat cross-legged on the floor of the desert that night, beside the fire of blazing herbs, listening to the monotonous love chants of the camel drivers and watching them dance as they sang—if such bowing and scraping and shuffling could be called dancing.

The gypsy, who had appeared from nowhere, had hobbled Jim's horse and was now engaged in feeding the fire. Where the fuel came from was his secret. He had accumulated a vast stack of it, but the stuff burned like matchwood. One moment it scorched and the next it was a dying bed of winking coals. Then, when he threw on more of his desert fuel, it blazed again, hot and high.

Sara sat beside Jim and let him hold her hand. The warm, safe contact comforted her. Overhead the star-spangled night seemed too vast. Without the clasp of Jim's hand she would have felt very much alone, and in this place of great space and distance it surely was uncomfortable to be alone.

The Arabs sang on and on. They enjoyed an audience and were tireless.

It was nearly midnight before the nomad's stack of fuel had all been consumed. The fire subsided for the last time and the diamond-studded sky was left unrivaled in all its cold and brilliant purity.

Sara went off with Eve to the tent they were to share. Jim went to his tent, which was called a "marabout" because in shape it bore resemblance to the tombs of those sainted persons.

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Grayling sat alone by the bed of glowing embers.

With a few words and a wave of the hand he dispersed the Arabs, who would have kept him company until dawn with great pleasure to themselves had he wished. They never seemed to require sleep or long for solitude.

At his bidding, however, they cheerfully went off and disposed of themselves for the night on the soft slopes of the great sand dune, where they held whispered bedtime chats which resounded through the clarified air as from the horn of a megaphone.

Grayling, however, paid no attention to that. He was well acquainted with the fact that sound in the desert carries with uncanny effect.

But presently Sara's voice rang out, shrill with annoyance. "Go away—go away, at once!" she cried in French.

It seemed that she thought the whole lot of them were camping under the flap of her tent; and Jim Howland, who appeared in pyjamas and an overcoat, thought they were alongside his tent. So Grayling had to shout at them, commanding silence, and after a little giggling, like a dormitory of rebuked school children, they finally subsided and silence reigned.

What were the thoughts of the man who sat solitary by the bed of dying embers? Now and again he glanced at the row of tents, dark and still in the starlight. The camels, hobbled so that they should not stray too far, were browsing on the tufts of sparse herbage, their ungainly forms silhouetted against the sky line. They might have been a mile or five miles away as far as the untrained eye could tell; to the untrained eye they might even have appeared as a small, scattered herd of goats. There was nothing here to measure size against—all was infinite, silent space.

Presently the man by the fire seemed sunk in dreams. His head fell forward on his chest and he gave a great, tired sigh.

Slowly the dawn came up, a magnificent spectacle of rose and blue amber, and as the red rim of the sun climbed to the edge of the horizon, shafts of brilliant light like swords of fire struck out across the sky. Jim's horse neighed for water and the sleeping Arabs stirred languidly in the nests they had made for themselves in the sand dune.

The flap of the big tent opened cautiously and Eve appeared, bare-footed and with a white woolen wrapper over her night clothes. Her lovely hair hung in two braids to her waist, and there was an expression of wondering innocence in her face, as though the years had been washed away and she stood on the threshold of womanhood once more. In her eyes was the look of a sleep-walker.

She reached out blindly.

"Aylmar," she whispered. "Take my hand—we shall find it now."

But the dreaming figure by the dead fire did not stir; nor, indeed, had Eve seemed to address it. She turned her head a little sidewise and smiled as into the eyes of a friend she loved and trusted, and she held her right hand, as though it were being clasped by another's.

"We shall find it now," she repeated in a happy whisper. "Look—how close it is! Oh, the beautiful blue sea!"

Slowly she walked away from the row of tents, still holding that phantom hand and smiling, but now her eyes were fixed on the western horizon where the sea of mirage lay so still and calm in the morning light, all fringed with foam where it lapped that inland shore.

"It is so near," Eve said. "Soon we shall know all about it, Aylmar—and find peace."

CHAPTER XXX.

BIRDS OF OMEN.

A STARTLING cry broke the silence and Jim Howland leaped from his camp cot and rushed out to see what had occasioned it. Sara was running toward him, her eyes wide with terror.

"Jim—daddy! I can't make him speak to me. Over there, do you see him? That's where we left him last night. I don't believe he's moved since. Jim, he's as cold as death. I believe—I believe he *is* dead."

Sara began to sob, and Jim hurried over

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to the stiff figure huddled so curiously by the circle of ashes.

The cook, from whose tent a thin spiral of smoke was rising, ran to join him, and then presently the Arabs, who had been at their prayers, crowded around, murmuring and whispering among themselves.

"It is the will of Allah! Allah's will be done. Allah gives life and takes life, for all things belong to Allah," they were saying.

They carried the limp figure into Grayling's tent and laid it on the narrow little bed which had not been slept in, covering it with a sheet.

Sara clung to Jim, sobbing her heart out.

"Oh, Jim, I haven't *anybody* now! Nobody in this whole world, and he was so good and kind to me. I only gave him trouble. If only I could tell him how sorry I am for all the trouble I gave him. This wouldn't have happened if we hadn't come to this hateful country. Oh, Jim, I worried him so!"

"Hush—hush, my dear child," Jim soothed her. "Your father loved you dearly, and whatever trouble you did give him, he took easily. And you're not alone, my darling. For what I'm worth, you've got me."

Sara's tear-brimmed eyes beseeched him humbly. "You care for me as much as that, Jim?"

"I care more for you than for everything else in the world put together. But we'll talk about that later. We must break this sad news to Mrs. Kingslake. Is she still asleep?"

He glanced toward the big tent. It seemed curious that Eve could have slept through the commotion of the past half hour.

"I don't know where she is," Sara said. "She was not in the tent when I got up and dressed, but all her clothes are there. I thought perhaps she had gone for a little walk to see the sunrise, and I wished she had waked me up to see it, too."

They looked around anxiously, then questioned the camel men.

All shook their heads. No, they had not seen the lady, but she couldn't have gone very far in a couple of hours—and, look, here were the prints of her feet in the sand!

"She was bare-footed!" exclaimed Sara.

Jim followed the foot prints up to the top of the high dune, where they were lost in the soft drifting sand. It was impossible to tell, after that, which way Eve had gone.

On all sides the desert stretched away into infinity, except in the direction of Biskra where the great mountains loomed in the distance. Jim sent a boy for his field glasses and then searched the horizon minutely.

The only visible sign of life was a camel train moving slowly toward Biskra, probably a merchant caravan from Tougourt.

Jim called the nomad who had appeared out of the desert to offer his services as hostler and fuel provider, and using the cook as interpreter—for the fellow spoke only Arabic—got him to understand that he was to set out in search of Eve. Four of the camel men were ordered to do likewise, but from the looks on their faces it was plain the task had no attraction for them. It was all "the will of Allah," and they were not disposed to interfere with that.

The nomad, however, assured Jim cheerfully that it would be only a matter of a few hours before he returned triumphant. In which case, would he be rewarded with a hundred francs?

"With five hundred," Jim told him, through the interpreter.

That announcement spread like wildfire, and the camel men said no more about the will of Allah, while those who were left behind to take care of the camp threw dark looks at their luckier companions. There was a gamble in this, and it was unfair that some should be left out of such a big sweepstake.

The day wore on and none of the searchers returned. The sun mounted hot and fierce and toward the afternoon a lazy circling cloud of huge birds hung over the camp. Jim sent Sara into her tent. He didn't want her to see those birds.

At sunset Jim, the cook and one of the camel men, went to the top of the great dune and dug a long narrow hole deep in the clean sand. Jim consoled himself for

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this hasty, lonely burial by the thought that it was what Grayling would have wished.

Sara had a prayer book and Jim read the service while she knelt beside him, and the stolid Arabs stood a little ways off, fearful of this Christian ritual of commitment.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LIONS' DEN.

HANDS not so willing as the nomad's gathered fuel for the fire that night. From a day of blazing sun and heat it turned almost bitterly cold. Jim dared not leave Sara alone, even though he felt that he could trust the cook to keep the other men in order, but they were too sulky and mutinous for him to take the risk.

They raised all sorts of objections now. Allah was displeased with them for coming on this expedition; in short, for trafficking with infidels. It was unlucky, this expedition.

One of the younger ones, a boy of sixteen, discovered on the point of taking himself off on Jim's horse, was hauled back and soundly thrashed with a sharp-bladed palm stick used ordinarily as a goad for the camels. The cook did the thrashing, the head camel man being one of the lucky ones who had been sent off to look for Eve.

After this painful episode, Jim grew restless. From the sheltered side of the dune, the camp fire could not be seen by anybody who might be trying to find them in that direction. The thrashing of the intended absconder had quelled the others and Jim thought it fairly safe to get onto his horse himself, with a lighted lantern, and ride off a little ways into the desert from the top of the dune.

He made Sara go into her tent again, and left the cook stationed alongside and in charge of the camp. He had no intention of ranging very far—certainly not beyond sight of the beacon fire.

After he had gone, Sara could not bear the stuffy solitude of the tent. Eve's clothes and empty bed filled her with a restlessness that matched Jim's. She thought of the empty bed in that other tent, and of the little mound on the top of the dune which the wind would soon level and obliterate.

She crept out and talked with the cook, telling him what a mighty chief her father had been in his own land, but how he had loved and understood the desert. It eased the pain of loss to talk about it, and as she talked it seemed to her that Grayling was really not very far away—that he was somewhere, just over there toward the horizon.

Suddenly, on the Biskra trail, a torch flared for a moment, and there was the sound of thudding hoofbeats, faint but unmistakable to the Arab ear.

The cook sprang to his feet, looking into the darkness and listening attentively.

"Some one is coming," he said presently. "Two people, for there are two horses. It cannot be *monsieur,* for he carries a lantern and went in the other direction. Perhaps *madame* has been found. May it be the will of Allah!" Then he cried out a sharp order to the sulky fire-feeders to put on more fuel, for otherwise how could any one who needed to find them in the night, do so?

Ten minutes later two horsemen galloped into the camp. One of them was an Arab from the establishment in Biskra which had fitted out Grayling's caravan, and the other was Neil Kingslake.

Neil and Sara Brinton faced each other by the light of the blazing brushwood.

He had ridden twenty miles since six o'clock that afternoon without a single halt, and if the beasts were sore and weary, so was Neil. He was also angry, for with every added mile of that back-breaking as well as heart-breaking journey his sense of injury had deepened.

It seemed plain enough to him now, that Eve had gone off with Grayling, and had done it in a rather low and cowardly fashion. He had a loaded revolver in his pocket. Steady, kind and matter-of-fact Neil Kingslake had gone as mad as that. He didn't quite know what he was going to do with the thing, but he meant to do something.

And there was Sara Brinton looking at

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him sorrowfully out of Eve's eyes. He could scarcely abide the sight of her.

"My name's Kingslake," he said stiffly. "I should like to see Lord Grayling. I take it that he's somewhere about."

It struck him as a happy thought that he would shoot Grayling and then himself. There wasn't enough room in the world for both of them, anyway.

"Daddy's dead," Sara replied.

Neil started and a quiver passed over his tired face. Almost, it seemed, his thought had killed Grayling by anticipation.

"*Dead*—my God!" he said quietly. "When? It was only yesterday that you left Biskra, wasn't it?"

Sara nodded; then gulping down the lump in her throat, she quietly told Neil about it.

He glanced toward the row of tents. Eve was there somewhere, he supposed—mourning her old lover. In the circumstances it would be farcical for him to attempt to console her. At the moment he felt that he hated her for what she had done to him. No, he didn't want to see her ever again. What she had chosen she must abide by, even though Grayling was dead. Some things are beyond forgiveness.

"It seems," he said, "that I've made this journey for nothing. I'll be starting back now."

He was too dazed to realize that he could not get anywhere to-night; certainly not to Biskra.

"Wait a moment," Sara objected. "I've got something more to tell you—something almost as terrible as about daddy. But wait just a moment."

She ran to the cook and got from him a mugful of smoking coffee, which she brought back to Neil.

What she had said had given him a sharp pang of apprehension. He knew that it had to do with Eve, and a moment ago he had been hating Eve. Was she, also, dead? Perhaps it was just as well if she were.

"Drink this," said Sara. "You're tired out, and you'll need it."

His first impulse was to refuse any offer of hospitality from this camp, but from the way his hand trembled as he began a gesture of denial, he knew that Sara was right. He not only needed coffee, but food as well.

"Now I'll tell you," Sara said breathlessly. "My—I mean, Mrs. Kingslake disappeared from the camp at dawn this morning. She was bare-footed and in her night things. They traced her to the top of the dune, but the wind blows so that in the soft sand the marks get wiped out very quickly.

"They've been out looking for her all day, half a dozen of the men, and now Jim's gone, but—do you see that lantern flashing? That's Jim. Perhaps he's got some news. If he hasn't, I'm going myself. I'm not going to sit here any longer and let her die of hunger and thirst, if I can possibly help it.

"I love her dearly and I really think, now, after what she did for me and poor mad daddy, I'd lay down my life for her—I wondered in Carthage when I saw those lions' dens, how anybody could be brave enough to face such a death. But now I know. Love makes you brave enough to smile at lions. The early Christians loved God like that. And I love—*her*."

Sara spoke passionately, her little hands clenched, her face gleaming like a white flower in the starry night.

Neil trembled under the impact of those warm, eager words which came straight from the heart of a child.

He knew that he loved Eve, too; that he did not hate her the least little bit, and a flame of energy shot through him, driving out the heavy, nerveless fatigue for which a bullet in his brain had seemed to promise the only remedy.

If one does not love enough to forgive, then one does not love at all; and love, as Sara Brinton had intimated, has possibilities which reach far beyond forgiveness.

Jim Howland rode into camp, the nomad leaping along behind, clinging to the tail of his horse. Jim jumped off, the lantern swinging dangerously, and puffing out a stream of yellow-brown smoke. Whether he noticed Neil Kingslake or not, had nothing to do with his news.

"This fellow's found her—" he said. "I

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can't talk to him, but I understand that he's found her."

The gypsy began to speak excitedly in Arabic, then the cook stepped into the breach.

As interpreted, the lady was lying on the floor of the desert about ten miles away, she was very ill and cold. Yes, the gypsy thought he could find her again, but he very much doubted if she would be alive.

"Will you lend me your horse?" Neil asked. "This man can take one of mine. The one my guide rode will be able to hold out another ten miles."

Jim nodded. He knew it would be no use to argue with Neil as to the latter's fitness. A flask of water and another of brandy mixed with tinned milk were handed to him, and Sara quickly made up a little bundle of Eve's clothing, which the nomad carried in front of his saddle.

In a few moments they were off, disappearing into the night like swiftly flying shadows.

Jim Howland now turned his attention to having a litter constructed, and making preparations for a small camel caravan to follow as soon as the faintest trace of morning light appeared to show them the way.

CHAPTER XXXII.

L'ENVOI.

AT last!

Dawn again, and there at Eve's very feet curled the white foam of the sea she had always longed to reach. The touch of the waves on her bare feet was bitterly cold, though. Indeed, every atom of her felt frozen and an icy cold wind drove a stinging mist of sand against her face.

The sea itself was not calm as it had looked to be from a distance, but raging furiously. The waves flung themselves at her feet and then fell back with a roar, only to attack her once more, and each time she was dragged a little farther toward the death they promised. Presently she was knee deep; then waist deep.

"Aylmar, where are you—where are you?" she cried. "I have lost you and you promised we should go together. I am all alone now."

She had discovered Sahara's secret. Those who found the sea of mirage or succeeded in reaching the phantom cities, never went back again. And Eve wanted desperately to go back. She fought each wave as it tugged and pulled at her. Now it was stinging salt spray that dashed against her face, and the waters, up to her shoulders, swept her off her feet and engulfed her with a triumphant roar.

She was flung this way and that, still struggling desperately against the fate her curiosity had brought upon her. An aching thirst was in her throat, but this water was salt and the taste of it drove her mad.

Then, suddenly, something warm enveloped her numbed body and tender hands lifted her out of the tormenting sea and gave her to drink from a flask of pure sweet water, and a voice quite close said: "Oh, my poor darling—thank God, I have found you at last!"

"Neil—Neil!" she whispered faintly. "Where did you come from—how did you get here?"

"Never mind, dear. It's all right now. Don't bother to think about anything, except that I am here and will always be here. I know all about it, darling—but nothing, *nothing* in this wide world could be worse than losing you."

And then Eve discovered that she was lying on the sand covered by a warm wrap. The nomad was standing near by holding two horses, and the morning light was clear and brilliant.

Although Neil protested, she staggered to her feet and stared intently at the western horizon.

In the distance rolled the blue sea of mirage. It looked calm and beautiful in the glittering sunlight.

If one walked long and far enough one could reach that shore, but Eve turned away and leaned heavily against her husband, her face against his breast to shut out the sight.

"Take me home, Neil," she whispered.

THE END

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The Blind Side

By STANLEY WALKER

MR. JAMES WALTON, in dinner clothes, accepted a cocktail from the hands of the raw-boned but efficient West Indian woman who was Mrs. Houghton's servant, and then, as he felt a warm glow spread through his veins, he looked across the table, over a wide expanse of linen and gleaming silver, to where Mrs. Houghton herself sat—lovely, vivacious, brilliant and unattainable.

James lived in the big apartment on the third floor, where, amid the luxury of his deep Chinese rugs and the exotic prints and paintings, he fancied himself pretty much of a gentleman. Once, and sometimes twice, each month he accepted the invitation of Mrs. Houghton to come down and dine with her in her basement dining room that looked out through French windows upon a charming garden in the rear.

Speaking with strict accuracy, Mrs. Elizabeth Houghton was his landlady, since he paid her one hundred dollars every month for the rent of his apartment. Yet—and James Walton was deliciously aware of this—she was vastly more than a mere landlady.

She was a sort of lonely goddess, a widow of not more than thirty years of age who seemed to him altogether desirable. Her husband had been dead ten years, leaving her the fine old house on Madison Avenue, in the Sixties, together with an income sufficient for all her wants. She didn't even need the rent he paid her, but the house was so large that it seemed foolish for a woman to coop herself up there alone.

Her husband had been dead long enough that he appeared as a dim figure out of the misty past. In the three years that James Walton had occupied the third floor he had heard her mention him only twice. Whatever grief she may have felt at one time had been assuaged by the passing of the years. For that fact James was grateful. The West Indian woman brought the first course. James Walton loved this sort of thing, these quiet, cozy dinners alone with Mrs. Houghton.

She had style. She knew how to enter-

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tain. She fascinated him, so much so that at times he was convinced that he was very much in love with her.

Yet somehow she seemed as far from his grasp as a princess in a dream. He never could imagine himself walking over to her and saying: "Mrs. Houghton, I love you. Let's get married." No. It wouldn't work.

"Mr. Walton," she was saying, "I can't quite become accustomed to thinking of your strange way of living—I mean it is such an odd life. So irregular. You say you have worked every night for years, and you sleep all day. You have few friends. I wonder if you really like that life?"

James Walton smiled, and when he smiled he was handsome. A little past forty, gray at the temples, square-jawed, with shrewd blue eyes, he had almost an air of distinction. And, privately, he admitted that he looked rather well in dinner clothes.

"Well, yes and no," replied James. "I often wonder if it's worth all the trouble. I work every night from eight o'clock until four in the morning. That has been my schedule for twenty years, ever since I went to work for the New York *Gazette*."

"Queer," mused Mrs. Houghton, "I had always thought of newspaper men as being in the midst of things. But here you are, a newspaper man, and you never leave the office. Don't you sometimes wish you could take a more active part in the events of the world?"

"You're striking pretty close home now," said Walton. "You see, I am a rewrite man. As I have explained to you sketchily before, that means that I never actually go out in the streets and get a story. It is my job to write what other men get and the stuff that comes into the office by various channels. But I have had moments when I wished I could be a reporter—not that I think I'd be a good one."

"Why wouldn't you be a good one?"

"To be perfectly honest, I'm too timid," laughed Walton. "The first day I worked for the paper I had just arrived in New York and I was scared. The boss sent me out to cover a fire. Not a very big fire, but I was all excited over it. When I got there I found the police keeping the crowds back, the firemen busy with their own work, and nobody seeming to care whether I got my story or not. I approached a fireman and asked him questions, but he didn't seem interested. I got my feet wet. It was cold. I was disgusted with the whole thing. Then when they had cleaned up the mess I had another reporter give me all the facts.

"That night one of the old rewrite men quit his job, and they told me to fill in for awhile. That has meant twenty years. Every line I have written in that period has been something that some other man saw. I haven't even interviewed a man in all that time. I have never seen another fire, never seen a subway accident—not even anybody run over in the street. Nor have I ever attended a political meeting. On my one night off I usually go to the theater, or stay in my apartment and read, although sometimes I walk the streets, half hoping that something will happen and I can see it."

"That would be fine," said Mrs. Houghton, "if something big would take place right in front of you so you could get the story. I imagine you got over your timidity a long time ago."

She was smiling at him. He thought he never had seen her prettier. Small, dark-haired, with gleaming white teeth and black eyes that snapped and laughed at you.

"I hope I'm not timid any more," he said, "but I haven't had a chance to test myself. But you've guessed my ambition—it's really more than that; it's an obsession, I think.

"I have written hundreds of stories of murders, gang fights, big fires, accidents, shipwrecks—everything. But the thing I dream of is the something that will pop some of these days right under my own nose. It must be something tremendous, something that will make a good newspaper story. I want to be the only newspaper man there, and I want to get the story, all the facts, every detail, and either write it myself or telephone it in to beat all the others papers."

"In other words," said the lady, "you are living in hope of the great coincidence—that's what it would be, wouldn't it, a coincidence?"

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"Yes," agreed James Walton, "practically every big story is, in a way, a coincidence. They happen without any plan or purpose. And here I am, waiting twenty years for that coincidence and it never comes. If I live long enough it will happen. The law of averages ought to begin working for me pretty soon."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Houghton, smiling down pensively at a fish that lay on her plate, "I suppose you would feel pretty badly if, when this thing happened, you couldn't grasp it—if you found you were still timid, or if you had developed a blind spot because you had seen nothing for so many years."

"Trust me," boasted James Walton, "I believe my eyes are always wide open. I'm just waiting for it to happen—that's all."

After dinner, which had been arranged earlier than usual so that James Walton could get to his office by eight o'clock, the man who dreamed of the great coincidence rushed up to his apartment, changed quickly into street clothes and took a subway for Park Row.

As he rode to work he thought of Mrs. Houghton. What a delightful idea it would be to have dinner with her every night! Why not try to marry her? But he laughed at himself, the idea was so absurd. She would be flabbergasted at the suggestion.

II.

ALONG about ten o'clock that evening the city editor of the *Gazette* walked over to James Walton's desk and laid a story on his typewriter.

"Jimmie," he said, "here's a story that was written late this afternoon about the failure and disappearance of Petroselmo, the big Italian private banker. George Drake is on the phone with some more stuff about what the district attorney has to say and about the crowd of people who have been gyped. They're trying to storm the bank. Talk to him and whip it together, will you?"

James Walton went into the telephone booth and talked for ten minutes to George Drake, the squat, fish-mouthed little old district reporter from whom he had taken hundreds upon hundreds of stories in the last twenty years. Drake was ungrammatical, crude, but he could get facts and he knew how to tell a story—and Walton could dress it up and translate it into English.

Walton went back to his typewriter and his slim white fingers played over the keys for twenty-five minutes with that astonishing speed which had made him the most valuable rewrite man in New York. They said of him that he could write any kind of a story better than any other rewrite man in the town—and that if he wanted to he could do it in half the time.

The story he wrote came out two hours later on the front page. It told of how Joe Petroselmo, trusted by thousands of depositors, had failed to open his office that morning. There was no trace of him—nothing to indicate whether he had sailed or whether he was hiding in New York. The bank examiners had got busy and found that his bank was as good as empty. The total was somewhere around half a million dollars.

Some of it represented the life savings of poor people. And these depositors, forming tragic and hysterical groups, had besieged the office all day. Their stories made pathetic reading—and James Walton's account of it, as usual, was more graphic and more moving than the story carried by any other paper.

James Walton saw nothing; yet through the telephone, and in the eye of his imagination, he saw everything. He saw events in color, in action, and terse narrative. That was his business, and his ability to do it made him of priceless worth to his paper.

He toyed with his typewriter keys. A fantastic thought was running through his head.

Suppose he should find Joe Petroselmo and turn him over to the police! Suppose he should run into him quite by accident, recognize him from the description in the papers, and be the cause of his downfall. Somebody was likely to find him sooner or later. Why not James Walton?

Then he laughed. "What an idiot I am!" he told himself. "The chances are a hundred million to one against it: I've got to stop this mooning or I'll be a crazy old man the first thing I know."

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He went to the window and looked out across City Hall Park, where the tramps were sleeping in the moonlight. He determined to forget all about Petroselmo. If the great coincidence should befall him, it would surely be accidental, something unexpected. So it was silly to plan, or even to think about it.

Better think about Mrs. Elizabeth Houghton. There was something worthy of a man's thoughts, although he regarded it as being as hopeless as a man desiring a lady on another planet.

At four o'clock that morning James Walton left the office and returned to his apartment in Madison Avenue. He tramped up the steps quietly, entered his rooms and switched on the light.

He was proud of this place. Into it had gone much of the savings of the last twenty years. He was inclined to admit that his taste in the matter of furnishings was excellent. He sank down in a deep chair and regarded it all with loving eyes. Then he went to the ice-box and drank a glass of milk—a nightly performance that had come to be as fixed a habit as putting on his shoes in the morning.

That night he dreamed, as was not unusual, of extraordinary events, bizarre coincidences. He was passing through Times Square when a mad aviator dropped bombs, killing scores all around him but, curiously enough, leaving him untouched. What a story!

The scene shifted. A great politician was run down and killed in the street just in front of him. He alone had the story—and what a good one it was! So on through the night, as he tossed on his antique four-poster, came these dreams.

His obsession rode him relentlessly. And in his dreams he was always equal to the occasion.

III.

THE next day was Saturday, James Walton's regular day off. He slept late, got his own breakfast, and then prepared to go out for his usual afternoon stroll. In the hall just outside his door he met Elizabeth Houghton, who was talking with an elderly man there in the dim light.

She turned.

"Mr. Walton," she said, "this is Mr. Parmly, who has taken that top apartment on the floor just above yours."

They shook hands. "You'll find this a very fine place, I'm sure," said Walton.

"It seems to be exactly what I've been looking for," rejoined Parmly. "Quiet, cool, and plenty of room."

"Well, I'll see you again," said Walton as he went downstairs.

"Certainly," responded the other man. "Drop up and see me any time."

Walton was slightly annoyed that Mrs. Houghton had decided to rent that top apartment. It had been vacant for years. And, though she had little need of the additional income, she often had said she felt she should rent it, as it was useless to her.

But James, for some reason that was not quite clear even to himself, disliked the idea of having another person in the house. Perhaps it was because Mrs. Houghton seemed more of the landlady now, and James liked to think of her as a gracious hostess who merely allowed him to occupy a floor in her house.

After the stroll Walton returned to his rooms. He could hear sounds of unpacking and the moving of furniture in the apartment above. He decided to go up and do what he could to make the newcomer feel at home.

He knocked at the door. There was a pause, then a voice called out, "Come in."

Walton found the new tenant sitting on an old trunk. A suit case, its contents spread out, was lying on a table.

"Pretty busy, I see," observed Walton, aimlessly. Was it imagination, or was this man Parmly nervous about something? Yet he answered coolly enough.

"Yes," he said. "I haven't much stuff, though, and I'll soon be straightened out."

Parmly took a pile of shirts and placed them in the drawers of a dresser. James Walton watched him. A fanciful thought came to him—could this man be the missing Joe Petroselmo? Their descriptions tallied, except that this Parmly had no mustache, and Petroselmo, according to the description of the police, had one of an iron-gray tint.

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But he might have removed it. Such things were very common: a smooth-faced fugitive often grew a mustache; a man who already had a mustache usually shaved it off.

This man's hair was getting thin. He was rather fat. His eyes had pouches under them. And his countenance did not suggest the name Parmly. In various little points of manner and speech and appearance, Walton thought, he resembled the Italian.

Then, of course, he at once cursed his own stupidity. The very thought of a fugitive banker taking an apartment on Madison Avenue was ridiculous.

Yet, was it? Many men had found Manhattan an easy place to hide. All one has to do is to rent an apartment, change one's name, and keep out of sight. But that was silly in this case. The long arm of coincidence, even given a period of twenty years in which to operate, could hardly be expected to stretch itself this far.

"Come down and have a drink when you finish unpacking," invited James Walton, as he rose to go back to his own floor.

"Thanks," said Parmly, "I'll be down in a few minutes."

Ten minutes later the man's eyes were roaming admiringly over the furnishings of James Walton's apartment.

"Nice place you've got here," he said.

"Thanks," beamed Walton, glad to notice that the splendor had not been lost on the visitor. "I rather like it myself."

Walton was mixing a drink when Parmly asked: "What is your business—if you'll forgive me for being inquisitive?"

"I'm a newspaper man," said James, and he thought—or was it imagination?—that he saw Parmly's fingers tighten and his jaws come together. Crooks were likely to be suspicious of newspaper men.

"And you?" asked Walton.

"Oh," said the other, "I'm a sort of retired business man from St. Louis. I got out of business a few weeks ago and decided to come and live in New York for a year or so. I'm going to take things easy for a time. May go in business again later. Depends on how I feel. My health hasn't been very good."

"That's too bad," sympathized Walton, as he poured the drinks. But he was thinking of something else: why should a retired business man from St. Louis, in ill health, choose an apartment on Madison Avenue in which to recuperate? Why didn't he go to a resort in the mountains? Especially since it was July.

In the days that followed, James Walton saw a great deal more of Parmly. They played cards and once they had dinner together with Mrs. Houghton down in her cool basement that adjoined the garden.

Walton didn't think much of Parmly as a dinner companion. There was something crude about the man, and at times he appeared dull-witted, absent-minded, as if he was worried about something.

At various times the fanciful thought that perhaps, after all, Parmly was the missing banker, occurred to puzzle Walton. But he tried to banish such suspicions; they were too far-fetched.

At dinner this night, while James Walton was wishing that he might be dining alone with Mrs. Houghton, instead of having this unwelcome third person along, the charming lady herself explained to Parmly that the newspaper man had an obsession that some day he would find himself face to face with a great story. Parmly seemed to regard it as a droll idea.

"I hope it will happen," he said. "And it may, too. Just when you least expect it, maybe. I wish I could help you."

Again it was Saturday night, and James Walton was off duty. As he was preparing to go out to dinner, there came a knock at the door and he opened it to find Parmly standing there.

"Come in," invited Walton, and the pudgy man walked in. After several unimportant remarks, Parmly suddenly laughed.

"I was thinking," he said, "of what Mrs. Houghton said the other night about your great desire to have something happen. Queer ambition, that. When would you want it to happen?"

"You're not thinking of arranging something?" laughed Walton.

"Not at all," answered Parmly. "I was just wondering.

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"Well," said Walton, "this is my night off. I'm going to the theater after dinner. Then I'll start walking home. If this mythical event could take place then, so I could get all the facts by midnight or a little after, it would make the last editions of the *Gazette*—and the chances are that the other papers would be delayed so long in getting it that they wouldn't have it at all. Yes, that would be about right. Midnight."

"I hope it happens," said Parmly, as he stood in front of a gorgeous Japanese print. "Well," he added after a pause, "I'll be going." As he got to the door he said: "When you get back from the theater come on up to my place and if you're not too tired we'll have a game of cards."

"Fine," said Walton, "I'll be there at midnight."

"Don't forget," cautioned Parmly as he disappeared up the stairs.

IV.

At the theater James Walton found himself in a world of make-believe. At such times he could imagine almost anything happening to himself. He could even imagine summoning the courage to make love to Elizabeth Houghton!

Moreover, it did not seem too much a stretch of fancy to believe that some time, before the years had dragged on too far, he might come face to face with the smashing, sensational event of which he had dreamed so long.

He went into a chop house in Forty-Fourth Street and had a sandwich and coffee. This required about forty minutes. When he looked at his watch he saw that it lacked only ten minutes to midnight. Oh yes, that date with Parmly! But there was no hurry. A few minutes one way or the other didn't matter.

Walton walked slowly east until he came to Madison Avenue, where he turned north. He thought of taking a taxicab, but dismissed the idea when it occurred to him that the walk to his apartment would do him good. He had been getting a bit heavy lately.

As he walked north in the practically deserted avenue his usual train of fancies came back to him. There had been robberies on Madison Avenue at about this hour. But something told him there would be none now. It was not his luck. Nothing would happen. The street would sleep serenely as he passed, and if anything should occur, it most certainly would wait until he was out of the way.

"Never any luck," he ruminated. "All a long chance—impossible."

Then as if to give the lie to his thoughts, a woman screamed. James Walton looked up quickly and saw two bare arms, the arms of a woman, being withdrawn from an open window on the sixth floor of a fashionable apartment house. It was as if some one had forcibly pulled her back. Then came the scream again, weird and terrible, as of a woman who is being murdered.

Walton's heart pounded. Could this be a murder? Some noted people lived in that house. Then the scream came again, and he thought he distinguished the word "Murder!"

He started to run inside, then stopped. No. He must have a policeman. He looked up and down the avenue but there was none in sight.

He ran over to Fifth Avenue as fast as he could and found a traffic policeman, to whom he told the story of the screams and the white arms that had been so hastily withdrawn.

The policeman looked at him suspiciously and grunted. He didn't appear much interested.

"But it sounds like murder," implored Walton. "Come on!"

Reluctantly the policeman walked with James back to Madison Avenue, and as they came in front of the house there was a pop and a pane of glass shattered on the sidewalk in front of them. They looked up and saw two arms and part of a woman's head leaning out the window.

"Help! My God, I'm being murdered!"

Then the head and arms were withdrawn as quickly as before. The policeman was interested now.

"Come with me!" he said to James, as they rushed into the house. The negro elevator operator awoke, stretched his

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mouth and looked at them reproachfully.

"Sixth floor, quick!" ordered the policeman.

The elevator began its leisurely ascent. James Walton could feel the sweat forming on his brow. It had been years since he felt such excitement as this.

He was already visualizing the story. It would be good, whether a murder actually had been committed or not. All the people there, he reasoned, were important. Whatever they did out of the ordinary was news.

"Who lives next to the street on the sixth floor?" the policeman asked the elevator boy.

"I forget the names—Johnson I think it is. I don't pay much attention to 'em."

The elevator stopped. The policeman got out, with James Walton following. They walked down the hall until they came to the door of the last apartment. The policeman rapped on it with his nightstick.

James had a picture of a battle. He flattened himself by the wall. Better be careful if any bullets started flying.

The door opened and the policeman eased himself inside, closing the door behind him. Walton listened, but he heard only low voices, and he could not distinguish the words.

In a moment the policeman came out alone and closed the door. He and Walton walked to the elevator.

"What was it?" asked James.

The policeman looked at him and smiled tolerantly. "Not a thing," he answered.

"But all that noise and yelling—what was it?"

"Oh," said the cop, "it wasn't anything except that an actress and her husband got ginned up and had their regular fight."

The elevator boy, waiting and grinning, said:

"Sure, I could have told you that if you hadn't been so excited. They get stewed and have a fuss every Saturday night. Nothing to it."

The car descended, with James Walton feeling very sick at heart. He had felt sure he had a good story, probably something tremendous, and it was nothing but a little domestic brawl between persons of temperament.

He parted with the policeman with nothing more than a curt nod, and resumed his walk up the avenue.

What a fool he had been! Excited over nothing. He might have known he never would stumble into anything that was important. He felt that the whole experience had been humiliating.

James Walton was more than a block away from his house when he saw that something out of the ordinary was taking place. An ambulance was drawn up in front. Two men in white jackets were helping two policemen carry something down the front steps. They placed it in the ambulance.

For the second time that night James Walton's heart beat wildly. Had Elizabeth Houghton been hurt? Or was it Parmly? He quickened his steps and reached the house just as the ambulance started away.

He started to ask a policeman what it meant when a little man came down the steps and burst out in a sardonic laugh. It was George Drake, the district man.

"What the devil has happened to bring you here?" asked Walton.

The little fish-faced, near-sighted reporter looked up at him and laughed again. Then he suddenly became mournful and shook his head.

"Damnedest thing you ever heard of, Jim. And what a whale of a story! I just finished telephoning it to the office from Mrs. Houghton's phone in the living room. Some of the other boys are in there now talking to their papers."

"But what happened?" demanded Walton.

"Well, this bird that called himself Parmly, that's been living on the floor above you—he was none other than our old friend Joe Petroselmo. The cops found just about all the stolen stuff in his trunk when they busted it open. But the funniest thing is—he had the whole works laid out for you. He wanted you to have the story, see?

"He wrote a long note—great stuff in

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it—and addressed it to you. He left it on the table, then he opened the door and took poison. Well, it seems that Mrs. Houghton was passing through the hall when she heard this guy take a tumble off his chair—when the poison got to him, see? And she went up to find out what was the matter. He was dead. She called in the cops right away. I happened to be in the station when the call came in, so I hustled over here."

"You say he left a note for me?" asked Walton.

"Yes, it was a pippin, too! Told all about how his health had been going to the bad, and how his conscience was hurting him, and then a lot of rot about the only woman he ever loved turning him down cold. There ought to be great rejoicing among his depositors to-morrow when they hear that they'll all get their money back."

"Where's this note?"

"The sergeant here has it," said Drake. "He's got to keep it, but he'll let you see it."

The man in uniform fished out the note. James Walton read it through, cursing himself.

Here was a story, as good a story as he could have hoped for, all planted and ready for him to pluck. And he had muffed it! He had wasted a precious forty-five minutes chasing a phantom down the avenue, when here was the real thing just waiting for him to come home!

"I'm a poor sap," said James.

"Yes, I guess you are, Jim. Did you read the postscript? It's on the other side of that sheet. Mrs. Houghton nearly had a fit when she read it and she didn't want to let the cops have it. But they made her see that they had to keep the note."

James Walton turned over the sheet and read:

> Sometimes I think you are a blind fish. First, you couldn't recognize me, even though my descriptions and photographs had been printed. But the worst thing about you is that you are too blind to see that Mrs. Houghton is in love with you. Well, maybe you'll wake up some time.

Walton walked up the steps. The newspaper men and the policeman had gone. Instead of going upstairs to his own apartment Walton went back to the end of the hallway on the first floor and knocked on the door of Mrs. Houghton's living room.

There was no response and he called out desperately in a quavering voice that surprised him: "Oh, Mrs. Houghton, please let me see you a minute."

For the third time that night he felt that strange contraction of the heart that comes with great emotion—but this was different from mere excitement. A muffled voice spoke pleadingly:

"Please go away. Please!"

Timidity vanished. He turned the knob and found to his surprise that the door was not locked! He saw Elizabeth Houghton curled up on her couch by the window. She had been crying, but now she was smiling through her tears.

James Walton rushed over to her and gathered her in his arms.

"I love you," he said, and found it wasn't hard to say. "I've loved you for months and like a fool I was afraid to tell you about it. Now tell me, Elizabeth, was that poor devil right? Do you love me at all, or was he a crazy man?"

The black eyes were laughing at him. Two white, soft arms stretched up.

"No, Jim, he wasn't crazy when he figured that out."

THE END

"IS THAT NICE?"

It is! This Complete Novelette, by Walter A. Sinclair, will hand you many a laugh next week, when we shall also give you "All of a Sudden, Christmas," by Ralph E. Mooney, and capital stories besides by E. K. Means, Samuel G. Camp and other favorites.

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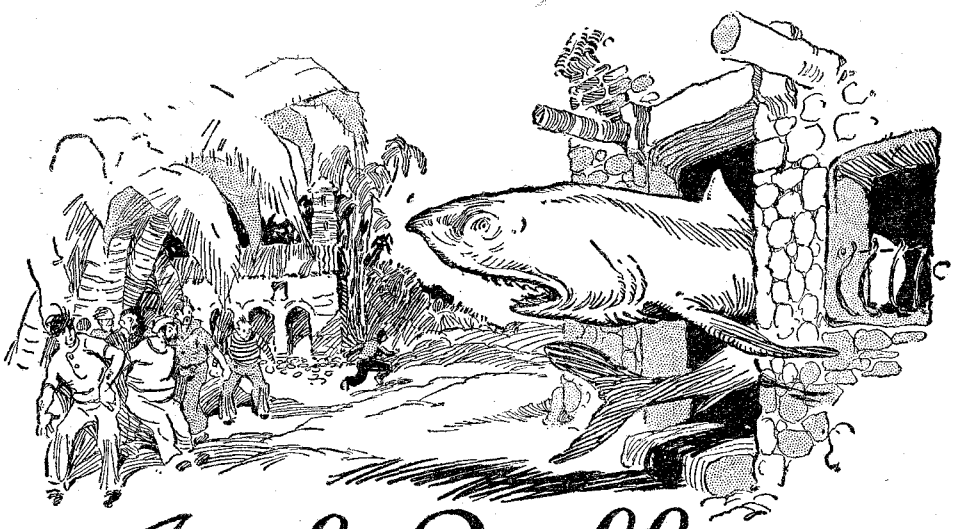

Josh Stebbins—Gunrunner

By A. D. TEMPLE

AS the storm passed, drifting away toward the eastern horizon, and the rumbling thunder sounded softer until it died in the distance, Pat McGoogle's grocery, that was also the village post office, was crowded with a dripping assemblage of victims of Jupiter Pluvius.

The schoolmaster was among the first, caught by the storm between the schoolhouse and the post office. His umbrella had two jagged holes made by the hail and his derby hat was considerably dented, giving a slightly rowdyish air to its wearer.

Scotty McTeague, dripping wet inside and out, Coonburg's living and ever present argument in favor of the Volstead law, followed staggeringly at the heels of the pedagogue. As he flung the water from ragged coat and dilapidated hat, an automobile horn sounded, then Fritz Spreckelmeyer, who farmed on Mud Creek, drove up in his new flivver, heavily loaded with sacks of potatoes, both driver and car covered with mud; but in spite of his plight Fritz was in high spirits as he joined the rapidly increasing crowd.

"Looks like it musta rained cats an' dogs down Mud Crik way, Dutchy," remarked one of the water soaked bystanders as Fritz entered, smiling through his mud splashed features.

"Vell, meppe so, but dey vos no cats undt togs fall on de car; dey vos mostly hop-toads undt pullfrogs. Von liddle green pullfrog fall down de pack of mine neck ven de rain vos coming down de hardest, undt dere vos tree hop-toads dot vos ridin' on top de radiator undtil der hailstones knocked dem off."

"Hey, Dutch, did ye see that seven-horned green huppopotamus an' a pink rhinocerous that was sittin' in the shade o' the big slippery elm tree just this side of Finnegan's apple jack factory? I seen 'em

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the last time I was down to Finnegan's an' I reckon they ain't gone yet." This from Scotty McTeague.

The telephone bell rang sharply, almost angrily, as Pat McGoogle leisurely finished an entry in the ledger before answering its call, then the listening crowd heard, as he put the receiver to his ear:

"Yes, this is the post office—who did you say?—yes, he was here just now—what! he hasn't been home this week?—yes, ma'am, I'll tell him. Good-by."

As he hung the receiver on its hook, Pat turned to Scotty saying: "Scotty, Mrs. McTeague told me to tell you that you'd better come home; she's afraid you'll catch cold."

"I'm goin', Pat," replied Scotty, "but I ain't agoin' home; it's warm enough now without that," and he staggered out of the door.

"If it wasn't for so many booze-fighters like Scotty, no one would ever have thought of passing the Volstead act," remarked Jed Styles.

"Yep, jest to save a lot of fellers that don't know enough to stop when they've got enough, we've all got to drink dishwater o' some kind or take a chance on goin' to jail if our breath don't smell right," added Jeff Tate.

"This white mule an' moonshine that we have nowadays costs three or four times as much as pre-war stuff, besides givin' a man the jim-jams in half the time. And that's all we've got from prohibition so far," chimed in Link Brown.

"But, my dear Mr. Brown," defended the schoolmaster, "this is a republic, our laws are made 'By the people, for the people' as Lincoln said, for the benefit and happiness of the majority."

"Purfessor," put in Josh Stebbins, "I hate ter conterdict ye, but you got things kinder twisted, seems ter me. The laws ain't made 'By the people' like you say, any longer, but by their misrepresentatives thet git sent to Washington by kissin' dirty faced babies an' tellin' the women they're goin' to put through laws thet'll keep the men folks home nights. I don't see whar the happiness comes in of havin' ter go down cellar an' mix a cocktail in the dark fer fear one o' them Volsteaders might bust in the door an' run you in; besides riskin' thet yer bootlegger sold you wood alcohol fer old rye. The pursuit o' happiness is a derned rocky road to travel on these days, I'm tellin' ye."

"But it is on the principle of the 'greatest good to the greatest number,' Mr. Stebbins, that this law to which you object so strongly was passed. We have the Bible for it that 'Strong drink biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder' and you can hardly deny that its abolishment would be a blessing to all mankind?"

"Yeah, I hev thought the same thing more'n once, arter I'd been takin' in the Barbary Coast an' woke up the next mornin' with a dark brown taste in my mouth, a swelled head, an' not a cent in my pockets of my pay from a v'y'ge round the Horn. But, all the same, booze hez got its good pints. Jack Chamberlin thet used to run the best bar in Washington, said thet 'Whisky makes a poor Irishman feel like a rich Jew."

"Did he mean pints of whisky or quarts?" asked Link Brown.

"You know derned well, what he meant, Link. I ain't no Dan'l Webster, but pernounce English like a free American citizen, jest ez I dern please, but what I was goin' ter say when you butted in, Link, ez thet this ere prohibition ez nothin' but a 'frame up' fer ter ketch votes, raise the price o' licker an' lower its grade. It was a put up job, I reckon, between the licker interests, thet wanted to do Uncle Sam out of his taxes an' perfessional politicians thet wanted ter grab the women's vote an' at the same time hev a lot o' new government jobs ter give out amongst their backers at the last elections. Fellers, I wanter say here, right now, before I forgit it, thet ef I git elected to Congress next November like some o' you-all are talkin' o' doin', I ain't agoin' ter have no soft jobs fer my supporters. I'm goin' ter help Cal economize; so you-all ken save your railroad fare an' hotel bills by stayin' to home an' not wastin' my vallyble time tryin' ter git me ter put ye on Uncle Sam's payroll. They're too many deadheads on it already."

"What's going to be the platform you

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run on if you ain't going to remember your friends?" inquired a voice.

"Fellers, I'm agoin' ter back up Cal, an' go in fer more economy an' common sense with more justice an' less laws thet ball us all up an' don't let us git nowhere. Lemme an' Coolidge an' Dawes run things an' you-all will sit up an' take notice."

"Josh, when your name is up as a candidate, all the opposition papers will start diggin' up ev'ry sin you ever committed. Can you stand the gaff?" grinned Link Brown.

"Sure I can, an' will! It ain't what a feller was, but is, thet matters in politics. I hev been studyin' it up. Why, there's a feller I know of thet made his start by puttin' the fryin'-pan brand on the calves he rustled; now he's in Congress. Ef my constituents are sure o' the rectitood o' my intentions, they ain't agoin' ter mind what I may hev done ten or twenty years ago when I strayed from the paths of righteousness."

"Just the other night up at Blackberry Corners I heard somebody say that the new candidate for Congress used to be a gunrunner down Panama way," Jeff Fisher remarked.

"An' he meant me, Jeff, 'Twas no lie neither, I sure did help run guns awhile back when I was sailin' on the Spanish Main."

"Beware lest thy sins shall find thee out," sounded a deep voice from the rear of the listeners.

"An' thet's nothin' but the truth, Deacon Stiggins; last week when I was passin' your cow barn I seen a couple o' Volsteaders snoopin' round an' I noticed a queer kind o' smell myself, but they ain't nothin' been found out yet, ez fer ez I know."

"Oh, cut it out, Josh, and tell us what you started to!" Jed Styles interrupted. "We ought to know if we are going to vote for you."

"Well, fellers, it was thisaway I got into it. I was on the levee in N'y Orleans with my pardner, Byron Murchensen, lookin' fer a berth. Down at the shippin' office they was signin' on a crew fer the tramp Senator bound fer So'th Ameriky an' the Spanish Main. We put our John Henrys on the dotted line ez quartermasters, unsight an' unseen, till we went aboard with our dunnage. Then our eyes popped out. She was a twin screw propeller built like one o' them Great Lakes freighters, high forrud an' aft, low in the waist, with no mast nor smokestacks. Only two big ventilators was all they was in sight above the decks.

"The chief engineer was an ol' Dutchman with a big pipe in his mouth. When we'd give the craft the once over we went an' asked him 'Hey, mister, how d'ye move this ere hooker? She don't have no sails nor b'ilers thet we ken see.'

"'It moves mit der pure air,' he sez.

"'What kind of air? Hot air?' we asks.

"'No, yust vind oof any kind,' he sez. then:

"'An' ef it's a dead calm, what d'ye do then?'

"'Mit der storage tanks oof gombressed air in der lower holdt an' von schmall tank oof lickvid air at ten tousand pound pressure ven de vurst comes to badder.'

"Ye see the principle was them ventilators caught the wind an' run it in to a hollow shaft thet was rifled inside with sorta wings thet give the shaft a twistin, motion; at the same time the hole was so small it compressed the air givin' more force, jest the same ez the nozzle of a garden hose makes the water squirt further'n ef it was all the same size ez the hose. This shaft was connected on to the propeller shaft an' the steerin' gear. With a ten-knot breeze she'd log twelve knots an' it didn't make no difference ef the wind was abeam, astern, or dead ahead.

"Our job was to stand two hour tricks at the wheel an' trim the ventilators. Ef the wind was so fresh thet we logged over eighteen knots we hed to switch off part o' the wind into the compressed air tanks in the bilge, an' bring her down to twelve or fourteen knots."

"The utilization of wind as a substitute for steam or gasoline, as a motor force, is another vast forward step in science and invention," remarked the schoolmaster enthusiastically.

"Yep," assented Jed Styles. "In the next war we may have airplanes run by compressed air that can load up their tanks as they go, then they can fly around the

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world without making a single landing, unless they get a hot bearing."

"It looks too much like pulling one's self up by his boot straps, is the way I look at it," Link Brown gave as his verdict.

"Link, you've been kinda leery of most everything since you bought that hundred shares of Texas oil stock last fall from that smooth guy that passed through here," laughed Pat McGoogle.

"You-all ken think what ye please," resumed Josh, "but I never sailed on a craft thet handled prettier in a sea way. Our manifest claimed thet we was loaded with sugar machinery when we cleared, an' we was right down to her Plimsoll mark, but she logged twelve or fourteen knots, blow high, blow low, or in a dead calm right across the Gulf an' down along the Spanish Main till we got near the port we was headin' for, then things commenced ter happen.

"The clouds were layin' low over the coast line, but stickin' up through 'em we could see a big snow capped peak loomin' over us thet looked ter be about three miles high. The skipper said it was a landmark an' thet we oughta make our port the next day, but we never made the port we'd cleared fer; all of a sudden we run into a heavy fog an' before we knowed whar we was, we was high and dry on a coral reef. We run out our two anchors astern and' tried to kedge her off by reversin' her engines an' workin' the capstans altogether, but it was no use. The glass was fallin' so we could see a heavy blow was comin' on, an' we grounded on a coral reef.

"The skipper jest chawed terbaccer an' cussed ez the glass kept lowerin' an' the wind raisin'. Ter make matters worse, we'd used up all our storage batteries of compressed air an' when the engineer turned on the liquid air thet he kept fer an emergency it spun the shafts so fast thet it twisted off both propellers, but didn't budge her a foot. Thar we was, aground outa sight o' land, our propellers gone an' a hurricane blowin' up.

"When it struck us we was lifted off the reef on the crest of a tidal wave higher'n the liberty pole at Blackberry Corners. We was jest carried along like a chip in a tail-race fer an hour or more, wonderin' whether we'd land in Davy Jones's Locker or on top o' the snow peak we'd sighted thet mornin'.

"We never seen the coast line when we passed over it, but the wave let us down easy on an even keel, twenty miles back from tide water, plumb in the middle o' one o' the old cities out in the jungles of the Spanish Main thet was built good an' strong by nobody knows who, an' was abandoned long before Hector was a pup, or ol' Julius Cæsar was crawlin' round in baby clothes.

"We was in the city square, her bows at the doors o' the church an' her stern ag'in' the hoosegow."

"I suppose that your knowledge of archæology enabled you to identify the uses of these ancient edifices dedicated to religion and justice, the bases of our present civilization?" suggested the schoolmaster.

"Wall, no. Ye see, purfesser, I never studied nothin' but a little readin' an' writin' an' 'rithmetic when I was in school up on the Penobscot. I cain't pernounce thet word, it's too long, an' I never knowed what it meant till I was past fifty, but the way we named them buildin's was because the wave hed brought a lot o' fish along with it an' left 'em stranded when it went back. There was a twenty-five foot, man eatin' shark stickin' his head outa the door o' the buildin' at our stern, so we allowed thet it must be the hoosegow, an' a lot o' them pretty little angel fish was flappin' round on the floor o' the house at our bows, so we reckoned it was the church.

"I'll tell the world, though, thet ef it was a real church, they was some o' the ugliest lookin' saints sculped on the walls thet I ever put my eyes on. Ef they was alive, they'd 'a' stopped a clock, or broke a lookin' glass. I don't believe they was meant fer humans nohow, but ye can't tell. Outside the square the hull town was growed up to jungle with monkeys an' snakes up in the trees to say nothin' o' millions of parrots an' other birds, while them spotted tigers thet they hev in So'th Ameriky was always sneakin' round in the brush below, jest ez likely ez not to jump one of us instead of a monkey."

"I have no doubt that those strange figures were the idols of that mysterious

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race of city builders that passed away and left no records," said the schoolmaster.

"Mebbe they was; we never hed time to find out much about 'em, fer when our skipper hed took the sun an' found our position on the chart he an' the engineer put their heads together, both of 'em lookin' purty blue, but they both kept a stiff upper lip, fer fear, I reckon, thet we'd mutiny an' desert ef they told us the truth of what hed happened.

"We found out fer ourselves when a bunch of these ere Spiggoty soldiers come marchin' outa the jungle, shootin' us up in good shape before askin' any questions. Then, ez we didn't shoot back fer lack of guns, they come aboard us an' wanted ter know what we was doin' in their country an' how we got so far back from the coast.

"When the skipper showed our manifest thet said we was loaded with sugar makin' machinery an' they opened a few boxes in the upper hold to find we was loaded with old single shot Springfield rifles, Gatlin' machine guns an' more'n two million ca'tridges to fit 'em, it made matters a heap worse, fer we had been beached in the wrong country. Them little one-horse republics on the Spanish Main are most o' the time fightin' their next door neighbor, when they ain't got a civil war at home to keep 'em interested, an' our shipload of war material hed been bought, specially, by the republic jest across the border ter shoot up the country we hed been drove ashore in!

"There were about three hundred men in the hull bunch, two hundred privates an' a hundred officers, generals, colonels, majors, captains and down to second lootenants. They claimed we was filibusters an' was red hot to shoot the last one of us fer havin' invaded their 'sacred soil,' ez they claimed, not takin' inter account thet we was there against our will, after doin' our dernedest to keep away. We sure was in a hell of a fix.

"They took out the skipper an' the engineer, who was the feller thet invented the compressed air motor, an' shot 'em right ag'in' the wall o' the hoosegow. Jest ez they was goin' to begin on the crew, Barney, my pardner, started jabberin' to 'em in their own lingo. He told 'em we was jest innocent bystanders havin' nothin' ter do with supplyin' arms to the enemy, thet fer a fact we didn't know there was any enemy, but hed signed on the dotted line because we was broke an' hungry an' wanted to earn our salt horse an' hard tack, with a little extry fer hooch an' terbaccer an' other joys o' life ashore.

"But they wouldn't listen; they hedn't killed nothin' but sure enough monkeys in the war so far, an' was rarin' fer blood, till a general, thet was the Big Noise of the outfit, come along, to give us the once over. He hed a big waxed mustache, an' walked with a limp ez ef he hed a cork leg, so his sword was always gettin' tangled up in his spurs.

"Fellers, I never believed in ghosts, but when I seen thet geezer, my hair lifted my hat six inches off my head an' a cold chill run up an' down my backbone, fer he was a dead ringer for the chief o' thet bunch o' filibusters on the steamer La Libertad, down to the squint in his left eye an' the wart on his nose. I thought he was dead twenty years before, fer the last I'd seen of him he was paddlin' round, along with his seven pardners, in the water, dressed in full uniform an' with a life preserver on, awavin' his sword an' yellin' '*Viva la Libertad y Mueren Los Gringos.*' We was about two miles off the coast an' the water was full o' sharks, so I couldn't believe my eyes when I seen him agin, but it was him all right."

"Didn't that happen when you and your shipmates squashed a revolutionary plot in South America by taking over the ship with the money and arms and making the owners walk the plank? Seems to me that you told us once about something of the kind?" asked Pat McGoogle.

"Forgit it, Pat. Forgit it! With the primaries comin' on it ain't a thing thet orter be discussed. It might hurt my chances."

"I reckon you musta suffered from a bad conscience when you seen your old friend again," Link Brown observed.

"Wall, no, not ezactly, Link. You see they was chucked overboard fer the sake of humanity an' morality. They was plan-

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nin' to start a revolution thet woulda cost hundreds of lives, so it was better to drown six or eight of 'em than to turn 'em loose to prey on their feller beings. Ez fer the money, we thought of turnin' it over to the folks they call'ated to spend it with, but when we considered the demoralizin' effect o' sudden riches, we allowed we'd better keep it fer ourselves, an' we did. Any one used ter high finance could understand why."

"Did the old general recognize you, Josh?" inquired Pat.

"He sure didn't, or I wouldn't be here tellin' you-all how it happened. Ez a fair-minded man I couldn't expect him to look at thet business transaction from my p'int o' view. I kept back outa sight an' let Barney do the talkin', fer I was shakin' in my boots when I see he wasn't a ghost. Arter he'd bawled out all gringos in general, sayin' thet a shark hed bit off his leg arter a bunch of 'em hed robbed him an' throwed him overboard from his own steamer, he said he wouldn't shoot us ef we'd enlist in his army an' help unload the arms an' ammunition from the Senator. O' course we hopped to it; what else could we do?

"Arter unloadin' her cargo we left the Senator high and dry in the middle o' them old ruins ter puzzle the next outfit of anteekarians thet should come along to dig inter ancient history. We marched outa the jungle with a hull caravan o' mules an' horses packin' the rifles an' the Gatlin's, the general pickin' up recruits ez we went along till he hed a soldier fer every gun thet they was in the cargo of the Senator. It was some army I'll tell the world!

"I never was a pacifist ezactly, but them Spiggoty soldiers knocked all the sperrit o' military glory outa me. My buddie hed murdered his wife an' mother-in-law, the top sergeant o' the company was doin' time in the army after hevin' robbed a bank an' killin' the cashier an' the president because the haul was smaller'n he expected. The rest of 'em was pretty much the same kind, fer the custom down there is to put all robbers an' murderers in the army, unless they wanter be shot off hand, ez some of 'em does, an' I don't blame 'em.

"Arter this ere 'General Pegleg' ez Barney an' me called him, got his army licked inter shape he marched us down across the line o' the next republic, the same one where we was headin' fer when we got blowed ashore. Our rations was mostly corn pancakes, what they call '*torteelyas*' an' sun dried bull beef, with fresh monkey meat when we could git it.

"Ol' 'General Pegleg' thought he hed the world by the tail with a down hill pull when we crossed the border without hevin' a shot fired at us, but he hed another think comin' when one day we was surrounded by the enemy thet hed led us into an ambuscade by knowin' the country better'n he did. He surrendered unconditionally, because he couldn't do anything else, for they hed the drop on him. Arter we'd laid down our arms they took every officer down to second lootenants an' formin' 'em in a square turned their own Gatlin's loose on 'em, fillin' 'em full o' lead ez a warnin' to the next lot of armed trespassers."

"How did you and your pardner get out alive?" asked some one.

"Why, we got a chance to talk with the general thet took us all prisoners, an' we told him thet all the arms an' ammunition thet he'd captured from the enemy was meant fer him anyhow, tellin' how we'd been wrecked an' the hull shipload beached in the jungle. It tickled him so ter think he'd put one over on the other fellers an' got his rifles without payin' fer 'em, thet he turned us loose, givin' us a couple o' hundred pesos apiece an' a safe conduct to the nearest port where we shipped fer home on the first steamer bound fer N'y Orleans with a load of bananas."

"Well," commented Jed Styles, "you did do some gunrunning, but nobody can blame you for it; if at the primaries they say anything about it we'll explain how it was and square you with the voters, but it's a great pity that the inventor of that compressed air engine was killed."

"Pshaw!" said Pat McGoogle, "the World War was started with hot air. If hot air could make all that trouble it's only a question of time when compressed air will run the world."

THE END

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All of Us, Sometimes

By HELEN GENEVA MASTERS

"DID you know Frank Bailey had a divorce?"

Wallace and Reed had just swung off the street-car and were walking north on Thirty-Sixth. A chilly wind blew from the east as it always did in early morning and the thudding sound of a horse's hoofs clumping along with a milk wagon, echoed through the quiet avenues.

"A divorce!" repeated Reed with surprise. "Seems as though Frank was easy going enough to get along with anybody."

"Well, he was slow," conceded Wallace, shifting his grip to the left hand, as they began to climb the Davenport hill. "His wife traded on that characteristic for a long time, it seems. You know he traveled for the Spencer Shoe Company. Gone a month at a time."

"Devil of a way to live," commented Reed, slackening his pace.

"Once," Wallace continued as the two middle-aged men paused a moment for breath, "Frank came home unexpectedly. Seeing is believing, you know—there are some things even an easy-going fellow like Frank can't stand for."

"Hmmm," returned Reed thoughtfully, putting Wallace's innuendoes together. "I see. I'm certainly sorry. Met her once. You remember, the Merchant's Convention in St. Paul. I thought she and Frank were very well matched. It never would have entered my mind that she would be taking up with any of this free love bunk."

"I know. I met her then too. She seemed O.K." Wallace spoke as if the woman's duplicity surprised him. "But that's the kind that put things over the slickest, I guess."

They had now reached the top of the hill and were on the home stretch.

"Must have been hard on Frank," commented Reed.

"Yes, he's quite cut up. Never suspected a thing, you know."

"Too bad," murmured Reed, as Wallace turned in at his brown-shingled bungalow.

"See you on the golf links about four," said Wallace with a parting salute.

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"All right. So long." Reed continued up the street, the thought of Frank Bailey's hard luck still weighing upon him.

Now he had reached the alley and the third house beyond was his. He loved the place—the old gray frame house which had been hit by the cyclone and afterward rebuilt with unexpected success.

True, it looked commonplace enough on the outside, but the interior was unique and attractive. The arrangement, of course, had been Fanny's idea—taking out that ugly partition, throwing the living room and dining room into one, and rebuilding a quaint fireplace where the original grate had been walled up.

Fanny was one in a thousand; he congratulated himself at the thought. An immaculate housekeeper, still she never grumbled if she had to hang up his pyjamas or slip his shoes into the closet, or if he spattered the bath-room wall when he shaved.

As free from nerves, as little given to flights of temperament as a Dutch oven or, since that was hardly a flattering comparison, as the unabridged dictionary or a willow ware bowl. It was hard to find a simile that would suggest her fine taste, her humor and originality along with those solid and dependable qualities that made living with her such a comfortable year-in, year-out existence.

He felt for his key. No, he hadn't taken it. Hadn't expected to get home before dawn. Darned inconvenient that they had changed the usual train schedule. Broke right into his night's sleep. And now he'd have to ring the bell and disturb Fanny. Too bad. Fanny always slept so soundly in the early morning.

Now, as he climbed the steps to the porch, he could see a light around the edges of the drawn shades. Strange that Fanny with all her methodical habits should leave a light burning. It couldn't be that she was ill?

He opened the door of the little storm shelter and pressed the electric button. There was no response, no shuffle of bedroom slippers patting down the stairs, nothing but the rattle of a loose storm window on the east side of the house.

He dusted his shoes on the cocoa mat. His feet touched something yielding—a pair of rubbers. He stooped. A man's rubbers!

Doctors, he supposed, wore rubbers. He kicked them away with contempt. Years, since he had worn them. But no, it couldn't be a doctor in the house. Fanny never was ill. He waited. How still a house could be!

The story Wallace had told about Frank Bailey flashed through his mind. He shivered as he recognized the similarity of circumstances.

Frank, too, had come home unexpectedly, perhaps as a result of a changed train schedule. But of course, in the case of Fanny, any suspicion would be absurd.

Then he flinched a trifle as he wondered if Frank on his doorstep had reassured himself in some such way. He half wished he hadn't rung and then suddenly he remembered that the doorbell connection was broken.

He peered in through the small plate-glass windows in the upper part of the door. There, facing him, on the top of the newel post hung a man's overcoat and soft gray hat.

As he gazed a strange weakness flowed through his limbs and his lips seemed glued together. Was this the kind of evidence that had first greeted Frank? He wished now that he had asked about the details of Frank's case.

He felt usually that it was poor taste to discuss such matters, in fact gossip of that sort sickened him. He lived life objectively, loved Fanny objectively—look at the allowance he gave her—and he believed the world was altogether too full of neurasthenics who went around prying into other people's feelings and subjective states.

He tried to face the problem as a detective might. If Fanny were ill and if that overcoat, the hat and rubbers belonged to a doctor, then the doctor's car would be parked in front. There was no car in sight up or down the street. He could tell that much by the light of the street-lamps, glowing like moonstones in their frosted globes. A little reluctantly then he discarded this possibility.

He called the roll of out-of-town rela-

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tives and was obliged to conclude that there was no likelihood of one of them dropping in unexpectedly. Anyhow—he might as well be honest with himself—if those garments belonged to a legitimate visitor they would be hanging out of sight in the closet. Fanny never allowed anything on that newel post.

He recalled how, when they first moved into the house, he had yielded to the appeal of its convenient knob and dropped his hat on it.

But it had never remained there. When, on going out, he had looked for it, Fanny had suggested with potent mildness. "Why, you wouldn't leave your hat on the newel post, would you? Let's look in the closet. Yes, here it is."

And so disciplined, he had come to pass the newel post as one who avoids temptation. No, that hat so rakishly tilted could belong to no relative or friend of his.

Burglars and holdups certainly didn't leave such accusing evidence strewn around. That, on the face of it, would be unreasonable.

Elimination seemed to force him to the one disastrous conclusion. He trembled with chilliness and nervous tension. It was hard to realize that Fanny could be so subtle. And he all the time so obtuse. He remembered now how carefully she had questioned him that very morning about the hour of his return.

"You get in on the Burlington at six?" she had asked, refilling his coffee cup.

"Yes. Be home here at six thirty," he had replied without a shadow of suspicion.

"Then you'll have breakfast at home." Fanny, it was true, never grudged the work of getting a meal.

"Waffles?" he had suggested, thinking how light and brown and hot she always served them.

"Yes, waffles if you like," she had agreed as he rose from the table. "You're sure your train doesn't get in until six?" she had added, following him to the door.

"Six, sharp," he had answered, picking up his bag, kissing her perfunctorily and running for the street car.

Now it occurred to him that always Fanny made sure of the hour of his return. He could remember back for years. She always pinned him down to the minute of his arrival. She'd be lonely without him—that's what he'd thought. Fool that he was. Yes, an egoistic fool.

The street lights went out and it seemed preposterously dark for a little while. Reed shivered with cold and apprehension. In his misery he wondered if Frank had stood before his front door like an alien. And had Frank, too, found it difficult to believe the evidence of his eyes?

Clearly, he had never understood Fanny. He wanted to be fair to her. He must assume part of the blame for this disaster. He could see now that he'd taken too much for granted.

Perhaps Fanny had grown tired of sitting by the lamp every evening and waiting for him to get through with the paper, and maybe she had been bored by the radio concerts when it had pleased him to tune in. Yes, he had been selfish and inconsiderate, but he'd never thought of any other woman.

If he'd only sensed the drift of things earlier, how he would have labored to keep Fanny's affection. He realized his mistakes like a man on the operating table.

Six o'clock now. The intruder would soon be coming out. With ears and eyes alert Reed stood watching through the plate glass windows. Occasionally he heard a creaking as if some one were walking about in the chamber above.

Morning began to show itself with pale misgiving. And now the light in the front room was switched off from above and after a moment he heard stealthy footsteps descending.

It would be unwise to risk an encounter at close quarters in the storm shelter. He stepped outside and listened warily.

Was it he, Mark Reed, standing thus on his own porch, or had he, in some mysterious way, changed indentities with a poor inconsequential devil at this address?

He heard the house door open with scarcely a click, there was a rustling of the rubbers, and a sound as if the door were again closing. He stepped quickly forward, in a panic lest he be outwitted.

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"Oh, oh!" It was Fanny, at sight of him, toppling in a faint.

He caught her and placed her on the davenport in the front room. He had never known her to faint before. He glanced around suspiciously. No one else in sight. He ran to the kitchen for water, in an instant rushing back to watch the stairway.

"Oh, you don't know how you scared me," Fanny had come to, but was half crying in a hysterical manner quite unlike herself. "I thought you were a prowler," she continued brokenly. "Thought I'd heard some one around the house since five o'clock. I suppose it was my imagination." Her handkerchief went to her eyes.

He looked at the newel post accusingly, hardening his heart. Fanny couldn't fool him with all this patter about being timid. Hadn't she rather prided herself on never letting her imagination get away with her? Let her explain the evidence before him.

He lifted the intruder's hat and looked at it. There was nothing distinguishing about it—a soft gray felt, somewhat soiled, that might have belonged to any man. The coat, too, seemed to be an ordinary hand-me-down.

"Oh, it's all up now," she sighed. "I can't run a bluff any longer."

"No, not any longer," he replied quietly. He would try to meet the situation calmly.

"I don't suppose you'll ever think anything of me again," She was looking down in a shame-faced way.

He thought of reproaches but said nothing, his eyes on the tell-tale garments.

"I'm not brave at all," she whimpered, noting the direction of his gaze. "Every time you've been gone, I've made a burglar-scare like that."

He felt smitten like the wife of Lot. The hat almost fell from his numbed hands. He caught it upside down. His own initials stared at him from the sweat band. And the coat—his, too. Great stars, his own clothes!

"Before this," Fanny was saying, not understanding what a great light had dawned, "I always brought in the rubbers and had everything put away when you got home. But now—well, I'm just a common 'fraid cat and that's all."

Fanny's self control was returning, but she couldn't face him yet.

Relief, embarrassment, apology rendered him almost inarticulate. He looked as self-conscious as a man riding in a towed car. He dropped the hat and sat down by her, drawing her to him with a rare possessive thrill.

"Never mind, Fanny. Don't ever think of it again. Everything's all right now, dear."

She leaned against his shoulder, breathing in long sighs. "Oh, I just feel as though I'd made a fool of myself," she exclaimed hoarsely.

"Never mind, Fanny," he took an easy tone. "It was a clever idea. Would have deceived anybody. And all of us," he paused to kick the gray hat across the room, "all of us make fools of ourselves sometimes."

THE END

THE SPAN

LIFE is a thought that flies through storm to peace;
Life is a deed of darkness or of light;
A word of echoings that shall not cease
When dust is folded in the star-strewn night.

Life is a burst of sunshine or a cloud;
A ship, or flotsam in mad waters whirled;
A fainting whisper or a pæan loud;
The lees or laurels of the circling world.

Olin L. Lyman.
10 A

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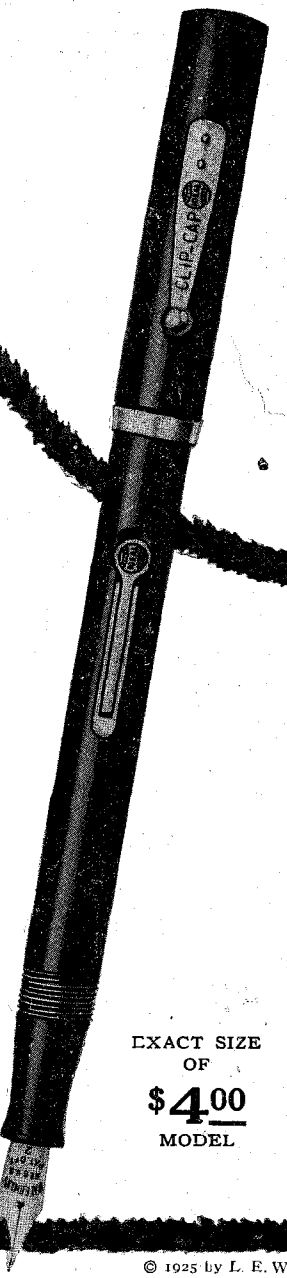

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